

My first year in the NSRRA

30 December 2020

I first became aware of the North Staffs Road Runners Association in 2014, when I ran Alsager 5 for the first time. I now know that it's the first race of their season, and as such it's hard to miss all these runners with letters pinned to the backs of their shirts, with no readily identifiable logic to the outsider. Some had A, B or C, but then there were others with M, W or X; or other letters. It was rather strange.

I investigated and found the NSRRA website. This explains the league as follows:

“North Staffordshire Road Runners Association was set up in July 1974 to promote road running in the North Staffordshire region. Members are organised into groups based on ability. There are seven mens and four ladies groups. There are also leagues for different age groups 40 to 44, 45 to 50 etc.

Each year 20 races are chosen to go into the NSRRA programme and the best 12 performances in these races count towards the league competition. In each of the events the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th etc in each group receives 50, 49, 48, 47 etc points.“

Back in 2014, talk of “20 races and 12 best performances” in just one year was rather intimidating, after all, I'd only started running as a means of getting fit a year earlier, and Alsager 5 was only my fourth race ever. As time went on and I completed more races, I saw these folks with letters on their back again and again. Towards the end of 2015 I tentatively joined their Facebook group and promptly hid away in the shadows to see what went on. It looked exciting, but I also felt that I'd be completely out of my depth. I told myself that if I could have a good year without any injuries or mishaps then maybe, just maybe, I'd sign up the following year.

The catalyst for change was hitting rock bottom with a DNF (Did Not Finish) at an event in Sheffield in 2018, but then rising back up and completing it in 2019 and learning a lot about myself in the process. I could see that constantly chasing “Personal Best” times over set distances became harder and harder, but rather than compete against myself all the time, the North Staffs league gave me a chance to compete against other runners of a similar ability. I decided that finally 2020 would be the year I'd throw my hat in the ring.

I signed up on 4 November 2019, and a few weeks later I received my membership details in the post. I was in Group G. At this stage I'd decided that I was only going to do the minimum of 12 league races as there were other races I'd already entered for 2020 and I didn't want to overdo it.

The first race of the year was Alsager 5 again, and despite having run it twice before by then, I could feel the extra buzz in the air, and I was excited to be wearing my group letter on my back for the first time. For the first race of the season, no-one yet knows who is in their group, so there's a lot of folks casually checking out your back.

I had a great race and managed to get a new 5 mile PB by some 52 seconds. The first league tables were published the day after, and I'd come 3rd in my group, out of sixteen! If I'd had any lingering doubts they were dispelled at this point, and I was fired up for the challenge. However, at that time my next league race wasn't until May, as I'd not entered Rugeley 10 (due to a clash with Wrexham Half), Knighton 20 (I'm not up to running 20 miles!), Newcastle 10k or Air Products 10k.

After Knighton 20 I dropped to seventh, and then the pandemic brought everything to a shuddering halt. I carried on running, but race after race got cancelled or postponed.

Thankfully, Ken Rushton found a way to restart the league, using virtual races. At first I was sceptical; I'd tried doing a virtual race before and I wasn't impressed. However, that was just me completing an event on my own and the time I took to do it in meant nothing; here, Ken had found a way to retain the key element of any race: competition.

The NSRRA update said:

"We are restarting the NSRRA season with the St Thomas Virtual 10k on June 14th. Why a virtual race? Well it is looking unlikely we will be able to hold any events this year so this is a way of helping clubs, giving runners something to aim for and obviously some NSRRA points.

At present we have 7 races signed up with decisions on others in the pipeline. If this is a success we will make sure we have 12 races in our programme with your best 8 to count.

So what do you have to do? You enter the race as normal using the links on our website. On the day you run a 10k from home, within 48 hours submit evidence of your run, a normal set of results will be produced and the normal league tables. Should we be able to start normal racing then we would revert to normal participation of events."

This was my first season in the league and I'd been looking forward to it. I wanted to do my best, and if this was the only option then so be it.

In the end, a total of 178 runners took part in that first virtual league race, 11 in Group G; and I came first in my group!

The next virtual race was Cheadle 4, for which we were required to include at least 300ft of elevation gain. Not a problem for me, I just head North towards Oulton! This time I came 2nd out of 12 in my group, another pleasing result and I was now back up to 5th in group G. I was enjoying the competition and the league, and as the summer wore on, it was a nice addition to have a virtual race every couple of weeks.

Before the August bank holiday weekend, I'd competed in 7 of the 8 league races, and I was in 3rd place in my group. This surprised me as I had no expectations of doing so well, but with it came the realisation that if I wanted to keep my place, it's not enough just to complete 8 events; I'd have to complete as many of the others as possible in the same position in order to keep others out! Otherwise, with ten races left, this unexpected success could still all be in vain.

The other complication is that, with the races being virtual, it's not like you can spot your competition out on the course and try and beat them. So the only option is to run your heart out on every one and hope that it's enough.

I went into the bank holiday weekend with ten league races remaining. By the end of September there would be just four left. If that wasn't enough, I'd also got a 'live' race on 20 September, the Cheshire Half Marathon at Capesthorne Hall.

I ran five of those six league races, securing 2nd place in my group for four of them and 1st place for one; all fired up, I also managed to get a new Half Marathon PB at Cheshire, by 30 seconds.

In Group G, this all put me beyond reach in 2nd position, with four races remaining. By this time, the country was heading into more restrictions and the virtual league races became the only show in town, so I gave my all in those as well, particularly the virtual version of Flying Fox 10 where I was able to finally beat my time from 2015, over the actual course.



The season ended on 21 November with the virtual Meerbrook 15k, over the final four races I'd managed 2nd place for each of them. From starting out with humble aspirations of running 12 races from 20 and seeing how I got on, I'd actually run 16 races from 18 and secured a podium position in my group!

No-one had expected the year to turn out as it did, but by adapting, the league had kept going and given me something to aim for in this hardest of times. I'm already signed up for the 2021 season, and whilst it will begin as the last one ended with virtual races, I'm looking forward to toeing the line with everyone else as soon as we are able to.