

SPORT

Tribute

County Antrim Harriers coach Greg Hopkins 'a companion to all'

County Antrim Harriers stalwart Greg Hopkins passed away last month. This week, club secretary Christine Murray pays tribute to 'a coach and a companion to all' on behalf of the members of the Ballyclare-based club.

Greg Hopkins is County Antrim Harriers. He was immensely proud of these colours, which he and his sister, Glynis Crawford, re-formed in 2005. The club originated from three church members in St Luke's Parish, off Belfast's Shankill Road in 1895. In the older days the Harriers had many international runners, especially in cross-country; Roy Brown, Ray Kirkland, Jackie Hoey and John Robinson and, more recently, Glynis Crawford and Christine Murray. Also, sub-2:43 marathon runners of note Darren McAlister and Russell Hughes. From a small seed of three, Greg developed County Antrim Harriers to a membership of over 80 runners today. He was chairman, 'The Coach'

and a companion to all.

Although he was called the chairman, he actually was the secretary, treasurer, public relations officer, sat nav, entertainment manager, drinks dispenser and contact card dispenser to all those unsuspecting joggers he followed behind, giving out the club details.

Also, he was the ultimate texter; his texts read that long it took half the day at work to come through. This was Greg; always thinking ahead, being meticulous and never leaving anyone out.

For the September AGMs he would order trophies at Easter, planning handicaps and summer trails, getting prizes and organising cars to races. Bowling, summer barbecues and Christmas nights out were all under his remit. As Coach, he was second to none.

Mondays and Wednesdays at Sixmile Leisure Centre consisted of tempo runs, speed work, hill work and cross-country (and in former years on Thursday evenings at



Greg Hopkins pictured after he had taken part in his 16th Larne Half-Marathon in 2009.

Ballyearl). A long run at the weekend and, more recently, a parkrun thrown in for good measure, was the normal week.

He had all the qualities of a coach: knowledge and experience; encouraging; resourceful; committed and giving of his time.

He was a qualified Level Two coach and he subscribed to Runner's World.

Here are some of his running credentials: 3:11 personal best for Belfast Marathon in 1996; 77 marathons in total ranging from Belfast, Newry and Mourne, Causeway, Devock, Dublin, London, Las Vegas, Boston and Barbados; 20 Larne Half Marathons since they started, except for 2014 due to ill-health; 1:27 personal best for Larne Half in 1996; 98 parkruns.

Greg wasn't just in it for the competitive runner. One of his biggest qualities was running at the back with the newcomers or slower pace groups. What they didn't know was he had done his training earlier that morning. He always had an encouraging smile. 'You'll not be first, you'll not be last,' he would say. 'Take the racing line'; 'Tail that girl then pass her in the last 100.'

Greg was also very protective of his girls before and after

races, making sure no male competitors and coaches were getting a look-in or he would have elbowed in and said: "Don't think your special - she talks to everyone," then chaperoned us away.

Away from the running, he was an encouragement to all - even those who themselves were suffering from cancer. In the club he was confidant and a listening ear.

His resourcefulness was one of his fortes. If he didn't know, he found out.

When I was running competitively and I turned up, Greg was able to tell me who was there in my age-group, what club they were from (and vest colours), their pace and sometimes their last race time. More amusingly, what training they had been doing, and even once, what vitamins they had been taking over the winter!

In the back of his car he had a tool kit that would put a garage to shame, from jump leads to cable ties, and a first-aid kit that a doctor would be very proud of - all used by members of the club at some time.

Time is the biggest gift you can give anyone and Greg gave it abundantly, freely and generously. He was an inspiration to all in County Antrim Harriers, new and old alike.

In recent years he gave of his time on Saturday mornings to put up barriers at the Waterworks parkrun and helped course direct, but always taking a seat in the background. Even when he was in the middle of treatment, he still managed to drive around the Monday and Wednesday night course routes, following us in those cold, dark winter nights, lighting up the way ahead. Greg is irreplaceable and no one can fill his running shoes. We can only follow him.

There is, however, some unfinished business to be done. He talked about it as if he hadn't achieved so much already. 'The Coach' planned to do 100 marathons and 100 parkruns and for County Antrim Harriers to host its own race. Those three goals will be achieved with the members' help.

Another two matters Greg talked about, was his wish for County Antrim Harriers to have its own clubhouse and for Ballyclare to have a running track. We can only aim for these.

County Antrim Harriers' club crest is the County Antrim Coat of Arms with the motto "Per Angusta Ad Augusta" which means 'From Adversity We Triumph' - how true this is of Greg Hopkins' legacy.

Hockey

Ballyclare Ladies gear up for new season

Ballyclare Ladies are already gearing up for the new season with fitness and skills training sessions in the pipeline.

After being in the Senior League Section 1 basement zone for most of last season, Suzanne Dickey's girls avoided a relegation play-off by a single point, so they are determined to do better in the new campaign.

The first session will be held at Ballyclare Rugby Club on Tuesday, July 22 at 7.30 pm, and will continue weekly until mid-August, when it will be replaced by the skills programme on the astropitch at Ballyclare High School grounds.

Except for Victoria White who will be heading off to university, all last season's players will be available again under new 1st XI captain Louise Holmes.

"With another year's experience in Section 1 behind us, we are quietly confident that we will move up the table this year," said club captain Gillian McMaw.

"We are hoping to recruit some girls who have just left Ballyclare High School, and we will be hoping for some talent moving up from the 2nd XI, but we are keen to recruit new players to strengthen our squad, so we send out an invitation to any players who would be interested in joining Ballyclare Ladies Hockey Club, to come along and join us," she added.

Interested in playing? Contact Gillian McMaw on 07784840474.

Win for Wylie

Lorna Wylie was the overall winner of the Henry Trophy competition, organised by Ballyclare Golf Club's Ladies' Section.

Wylie topped a field of 58 ladies to walk away with the number-one prize, having carded 41 points.

Rebecca McConnell won the Section 1 0-24 handicap category, while Eileen Parke's 38 points saw her win the Section 2 25-36 handicap.

Ballyclare GC's Lady Captain's Day is set for August 2.



Greg Hopkins celebrates completing the 2009 London Marathon with Irene Downey (left) and Roberta Henry. LT19-810-CON



Greg (centre) with fellow Harriers Elaine McKee, Johnny Carter, Michael Matthews and Debbie Hill in 2007. LT07-665-CON