

## **If at first you don't succeed...**

### **Mike Fleet's trials in the Surrey Championships**

YOU MAY HAVE seen him at track meetings around the county: a stout, barrel-chested chap with a no-nonsense air about him that says, 'School Teacher'. He's either wearing a bright red blazer and armed with a brace of fierce-looking starting pistols, or taking photos of track and field action with an expensive-looking camera slung around his neck. He's Mike Fleet, aged 75 last St Valentine's Day, and a stalwart of Croydon Harriers. He has been secretary of the club he has nurtured for 43 years, and also qualified as a AAA coach back in 1964. His most famous discovery thus far is Martyn Rooney who reached the Beijing Olympic 400 metres final aged 21, and has dipped inside 45 seconds for the one lap distance on several occasions.

In his day, Fleet was also fleet of foot: a pretty good half miler in fact, with a best of 1 minute, 48.9 seconds for 880 yards (which converts to 1:48.2 for 800 metres, by the way). He clocked that time, aged 24, on the cinder track at Brighton's picturesque Whitdean Stadium on 1st September, 1962. He was also once timed at 46.6sec for a 400 metres relay leg, and had a best of 48.3 from starting blocks. Oh, and he once ran a mile in 4 minutes, 17.2 seconds.

His fast run at Brighton earned him an English vest in the British Empire and Commonwealth Games at Perth, Western Australia in November-December, 1962. Here Fleet raced against Peter Snell, among others, in the 880 yards final. The burly New Zealander won three Olympic titles in 1960 and 1964 and broke numerous world records during a glittering track career, and at those Empire/Commonwealth Games he won the 880 yards and Mile titles, duplicating what Aussie Herb Elliott had done at Cardiff in 1958.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's put the Mike Fleet story into the starting blocks. After completing his studies at the Trinity School of John Whitgift in Croydon, and then doing obligatory National Service in the Royal Air Force, Fleet graduated from Loughborough College with a teaching degree, specialising in Geography and Physical Education.

He also raced many times in the Surrey Championships in the days when the county's top athletes turned out every year to compete at Motspur Park; a scenic and very atmospheric venue in beautiful grounds once owned by London University. This was the track where a frail-looking Blackheath solicitor named Sydney Wooderson set world records at 880 yards and the Mile back in the 1930s, and where many years later 17-year-old Steve Ovett clocked exactly four minutes in his first attempt at running a Mile. (The late Bob Sparks, who

lived just yards from the track, timed Ovett at 1500m in 3:44.8 in that race). Alas, what used to be a well-groomed cinder track is no longer there and the venue is now a training ground for Fulham Football Club; the personal toy of Saudi billionaire Mohammed Fayed.

Unlike today's top stars, no one bypassed the Surrey Championships back then; it was regarded as the first test of the season for internationals such as Gordon Pirie, Brian Hewson, Chris Chataway, Tony Harris, Bob Setti, Roly Langridge, Laurie Reed, Ian Boyd, Mike Maynard, John Thresher, Mike Gowan, Gerry North and Peter Driver and the Holt brothers to name just a few of the distance men alone.

Now Mike Fleet's special claim to fame is that he must have the biggest collection of runner-up 800m/880y medals in the history of the Surrey Championships - and that's no exaggeration. Here's the story:

1959 as a 21-year-old, placing third to Brian Hewson and Bob Harvey. He was third again in 1960 - behind Hewson and Tony Milner, and yet again in 1961 when Milner and Tony Harris, drilling holes in each other as they battled it out, were the first two across the line just head of him.

Fleet was heavily favoured to win the county half mile title in 1962, but in a thrilling finish he was surprisingly nosed out at the tape by his own clubmate Bob Harvey.

In the 1963 county final Mike did everything right: he hit the front before 660 yards, and seemed to be on his way to a solid win. But coming off the last turn, Terry Keen of Hercules AC found another gear and eased past Fleet as he tightened in the closing strides, winning by two tenths in 1:50.5. Writing about the race in the London Times, ace reporter Neil Allen wrote: 'Fleet took command on the final back straight, and surely had his first county title sewn up, but he could do nothing about the inspiration which suddenly took hold of Keen 50 yards out...'

Fast forward to 1964: in the half mile heats at Motspur Park on a balmy Thursday evening, Fleet successfully intimidated the opposition - he took off from the gun and bore down hard, winning by over 60 yards in 1:51.4. Now believe it or not, but the Surrey 880 yards final that year was televised live on BBC's Grandstand programme. Yes, on the Saturday afternoon of 30 May, 1964 BBC Sport interrupted coverage of Horse Racing and Cricket to drop into Motspur Park just before 2 pm to bring the Surrey senior men's 880 yards final to millions of viewers across the UK. Our hero tackled the race with typical front-running courage and gusto. As he had done in the heats, Fleet attempted

to lead every step of the two lap journey - and he almost succeeded. But getting inspired this time was young David Cocks of Belgrave Harriers, who was a step behind Fleet as he charged past the bell in 54.1 seconds. Now this was 1:48.2 pace and surely they had to slow. So they did, but not by much. Cocks clung to the leader down the back straight for the second time, and he was still there, a stride behind Fleet, as they came off the last bend. With spectators in the main stand along the home straight rising to their feet in excitement, the Belgrave man moved wide and edged past Fleet on the line to eke out a win in 1:49.6. For Fleet (laps of 54.1 and 55.6) it was a yet another disappointment, and for Cocks (54.2 and 55.4) it was indeed a 'one off', because he never ran anywhere near that quickly again.

Mike Fleet losing the county two lap title to a different man every year was now becoming a regular occurrence. Enthusiasts of the sport in Surrey asked each other - 'When on earth is he ever going to do it?'. Well, not for a while, was the answer. Mike himself must have been pretty brassed off at being on the losing side of tight finishes every year, but that unhappy state of affairs was not about to change immediately: he faded to fourth place and out of the medals in the 1965 final, getting outkicked in a slow-run race by Kelvin Bromley (1:53.9), Mike Varah and David Prior. And in 1966, injury prevented him from taking part in the final after winning his heat in 1:55.0. Mike watched Saturday's final, in which Varah equalled Brian Hewson's Championship Best of 1:49.3 in a very close race with Jim Johnson (1:49.4).

The Croydon man eventually pulled it off on a damp Saturday afternoon on a partly flooded track. The exact date was 20th May, 1967, and the venue was of course Motspur Park, but there were no TV cameras on hand this time. Guess what? Fleet took the lead soon after the start, but this time he had opened a sizeable gap and successfully broken all his opposition after a lap and a half. No one was dogging his strides close behind as he sped into the last furlong (that's 220 yards to you youngsters). Fleet charged on to reach the finish line with everyone in his wake and no one in front of him, and he got there in one minute and 53.6 seconds. Irishman Mike Geraghty chased him home three yards back. It had taken him nine long years, but he had finally nailed it. Michael Fleet was Surrey County Half Mile Champion...

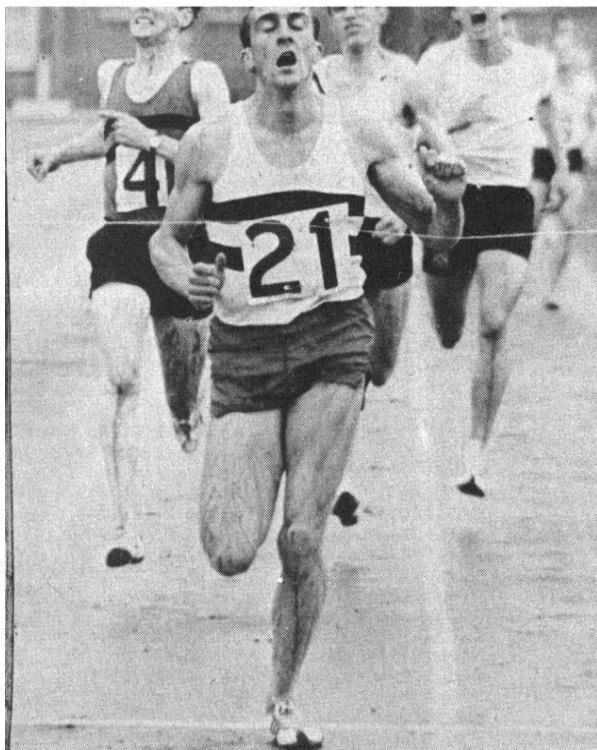
Mike Fleet in Surrey Championships (all at Motspur Park)

1959 (880y) 3rd 1:52.2 (1st Brian Hewson 1:49.6; 2nd Bob Harvey 1:52.0)  
1960 (880y) 3rd 1:52.4 (1st Hewson 1:52.7, 2nd Tony Milner 1:53.3)  
1961 (880y) 3rd 1:51.3 (1st A Milner 1:50.7, 2nd Tony Harris 1:50.9)  
1962 (880y) 2nd 1:53.7 (1st Bob Harvey 1:53.6)

1963 (880y) 2nd 1:50.7 (1st Terry Keen 1:50.5)  
1964 (880y) 2nd 1:49.7 (1st David Cocks 1:49.6)  
1965 (880y) 4th 1:54.3 (1st Kelvin Bromley 1:53.9, Mike Varah 1:54.0, David Prior 1:54.2)  
1966 (880y) Withdrew injured after winning heat in 1:55.0  
1967 (880y) 1st 1:53.6 (2nd Mike Geraghty 1:54.0)  
1968 (880y) 2nd 1:53.4 (1st Nick Lovatt 1:53.3)  
1969 (800m) 2nd 1:51.8 (1st Tony Harris 1:51.3)  
1970 (800m) 2nd 1:51.7 (1st Martin Winbolt-Lewis 1:48.5, CBP)  
1971 (400m) 1st 50.1 (49.8 in heats)

Mike Fleet's autobiography 'I also ran by Mike Who?' can be purchased via [www.ialsoran.co.uk](http://www.ialsoran.co.uk)

*David Cocksedge*



Mike Fleet winning the 1967 Surrey 880 yards title at Motspur Park.