



Name: Eleanor Bolton

College: Keble

Subject: Biomedical Sciences

Years of Study: 2017-2020



Eleanor Bolton: An Inspirational Story!

Starting university competing for the 'Turtles' and racing her way to a GB debut, Eleanor's story is one of progression, achievement, and community spirit. Eleanor tells us all about what makes OUCCC so special to her and the journey of running that followed.

Early Years:

Eleanor, though not initially a runner, was sporty from a young age. Spreading her time between dance, netball and swimming, Eleanor's early sporting career ranged across a number of sports. A casual member of her local running club, she was sad to see the club dissolve and took to joining her 2 older brothers on their own running adventures. As Eleanor puts it, *'I was a bit of a liability, and would lose them all the time'*.

As the summer before joining University commenced, Eleanor and her brother were running together in their local park, where they passed by a running club getting ready in the car park. Eleanor's close friend was a member of the running club, and soon after she received a message from a member of the club noting that they had seen her running in the Park, and asked whether she would like to join them for a road relay (for which they still needed one more person to fill a spot). A fun relay and a group of people to run with was just the right thing to kickstart Eleanor's love for running.

Oxford Years:

Starting Oxford still new to the competitive running scene, Eleanor was proud to say she had run a sub 7:30 minute mile. She was excited to meet other runners and found herself in a community of dedicated OUCCC members, including fellow Biomedical Scientist Charlotte Dannatt. With immediate friendships forming, and Coach Kyle Bennett leading training, Eleanor joined in with sessions and found her competitive spirit made her eager to keep up with the faster girls *“I was dying to keep up with her!”*.



Eleanor and Charlotte pre-race

Soon enough Varsity came along and Eleanor established herself as a key member of the Turtles team. Oxford was hosting, and Shotover was the place to be as the teams approached the big day. A twisted turn of events for Eleanor however, meant that during her warm up she rolled her ankle, leaving everyone wondering if she'd be okay to run. Eleanor, not one to say no to competition, was quick to borrow some ibuprofen from team mate Anna Sharp, and set herself up on the start line. As always, Shotover's hilly and challenging course is no easy feat to conquer, but Eleanor stormed through the race, adrenaline taking care of her pre-race stumble, and lead her to victory of the 2nds match. An individual champion and team win for the Turtles was exactly what was needed to get Eleanor hooked into the sport.



Eleanor at II-IVs Varsity, Shotover

At this point, Eleanor's competitive ambitions centred around the all-elusive barrier of breaking 19:00 minutes for the 5k. "At home I would get people to pace me. I kept on trying, but I just couldn't break it". Surrounded by a group that made her fall in love with running, the community in OUCCC was key to the transformation that followed. Having thrown herself into the OUCCC community, Eleanor found herself returning home one day to run 17:30 5k. "It just goes to show what Oxford training does". She went on to win the Northerns U20 that year as well as getting selected for the Women's Blues race. "I just kept getting 30 second PBs all the time, eventually getting me down to 16:30". The following year, her running accomplishments nationally, earned her her first GB vest at the European Cross Country Championships.



Eleanor with the Women's Blues Team at Wimbledon Common

"OUCCC is just so special. There is no defining moment that I can pinpoint for when things changed. It's all about consistency. Not just running miles consistently, but consistently enjoying it and wanting to turn up. And that was because it was such a great group"

Whilst at University, Eleanor continued to train with the OUCCC team during term time, and linking back up with her home group during the vacations. Her journey to GB involved trying out different disciplines too. Notably, a period of Steeplechase training involved lots of hurdle practice to prepare for the barrier jumps. Whilst Eleanor found the hurdling practice made her stronger for endurance running, the races themselves landed her with an Achilles injury, that required a period of cross-training and recovery before she could get back to fitness.

What was your favourite Memory in OUCCC

"Oh so many!"

Bearfoot in Jericho!

Arriving in Oxford, Eleanor was introduced to the joy's post-session trips to Bearfoot Café in Jericho. "I had never been before, but I still reminisce about it now. It's the best cake ever. And cake is the best fuel for runners!". During Eleanor's time in OUCCC cake trips were already a highlight. Today the tradition continues, with women's 'Cake Afternoons' being a popular past-time for our current women's teams. Every so often, all the women of OUCCC, regardless of team, commitment or general attendance, get together for an afternoon of baked goods and good chat. It's a fantastic way for everyone to bond outside of training.

The memories for Eleanor are still a highlight and whenever she returns to Oxford her mind is clear: *“I don’t care what we do as long as we go to Bearfoot!”*. Even now, a coffee and cake after a session hits the spot perfectly!

BUCS Cross!

During Eleanor’s final year, her role as Vice-Captain lead her to the responsibility of organising the annual trip to BUCS Cross-Country (British University Championships). For her, this meant sending a full team of Men and Women to Edinburgh for the national competition, where Oxford had a good chance of reaching medal positions.

“BUCS Cross is always just so exciting! The races, the afterparties, and the morning after! I remember one year in Exeter, me and Charlotte got up really early the next morning for a beautiful morning run. It was amazing!”

Culture!

“What I love about OUCCC is that everyone does it because they love it. There’s a culture of ‘anyone can go’. You don’t have to be at every training session, but people wanted to be. I remember all of EH being so full of people on a Wednesday lunch. It was incredible and such a good atmosphere”.

For Eleanor, it was the little things on a day to day that made the culture of OUCCC so great. *“Little things like smashing out a session and feeling great after it. Doing Drills in the Cricket Schools. We didn’t have the amazing facilities that the other universities have. But we showed up and we did the work”*.

Being part of a team was also a big part of the OUCCC experience for Eleanor. She remembers her experiences of running for both the Turtles and the Blues fondly, saying *“I’m glad I got to experience running for each team. People train hard, and they want something to show for it. It’ll be great to see the Women’s 3rds team getting the same chances as the Men’s 3rds team soon”*.



Eleanor running at the Athletics Varsity Matches

Post-Uni Life

Being a finalist during the Covid-19 era, Eleanor found herself sitting her final University Exams in her bedroom at home during the Lockdown. The pandemic put a hold on any considerations of pursuing athletics in America, and Eleanor instead found prime fitness at home. Making a routine of revision and training, Eleanor was able to progress her training even further:

“I didn’t realise just how fit I got during Covid times. I was training really well. It was mainly on my own, sometimes with someone on a bike, and sometimes with the older guys in the running club- they’d each take one rep and try and beat me! Soon I knew I was in 16 minute shape. I ran a podium race and got a massive PB. 15:54 and it just felt so easy!”

Eleanor was now focusing on 5k/10k Track races, and was selected for the European U23 championships. Ranked 3rd in the race, she was going for a medal. However, in an isolated race (coaches couldn’t attend due to COVID restrictions), the tactical aspects of the race got the better of her, leading to a 1500m PB mid-race, and an 8th place overall. Still very impressive nonetheless!

Eleanor was going from strength to strength, being called up once again for international racing, this time in Belgium at the *Lotto Cross Cup*. In a fantastic display of Cross Country Running, Eleanor won the international competition, finding herself on the podium, followed by a trip to the athlete drug testing centre, another new experience to add to the repertoire! With nationals up next she was going for Gold, chasing down Jess Gibbon. In a tactical learning experience she just missed out, landing an impressive Silver instead.

“When I was competing at all these internationals I remember people coming up to me and saying “Oh you are so talented, you’re doing so well”. I guess the honest response to that is “Its not talent, I just work really hard”. And its true- training and competing at that level is a lot of work.



Eleanor representing GB at the European Cross Country Championships (left) and representing England at the Lotto Cup (right) in Belgium.

After her final year of University was disrupted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Eleanor began searching the market for a job that would allow her the flexibility and time to pursue her running career. Through acquaintances made at her local Park Run, Eleanor was able to find job in Data Analytics, where she found the flexibility that could accommodate her training regime. *“It worked really well. I was able to be flexible so that I could still train and go to the gym. I was even able to work from home whilst on training camps, like in Portugal and Font Romeau.”*

After some time however, Eleanor began battling with Injuries. In the hope that she could return to a balance of training and education, Eleanor moved to Leeds to embark on a PhD involving Artificial Intelligence for medical diagnosis in care. This shift in lifestyle, training groups and location has its new challenges, but Eleanor’s resolve and determination remains strong:

“I want to go to the Olympics. I want to do marathons. I have to be ambitious. People will look and say that’s crazy, but we need ambition to succeed. Resurgence is possible. Look at the Olympians this year, look at Georgia Bell. Look at myself before I qualified for GB. That’s what I tell myself now, that you are that person that you were back then. Start from the start. Do it all again, and you will get there”.

We wish Eleanor the best of luck on her future and will be supporting her and rooting for her every step of the way!

“Rather than striving for fitness and performances, strive to be happy and you’ll get there quicker.”

The Impact of Mental and Physical Health on Running

During our conversation, Eleanor was just one of many alumni to raise the less-well-discussed aspects of being a runner, including both mental and physical health as an important part of the sport. Eleanor is an advocate for the prioritisation of mental health and wellbeing within sport and hopes that with more discussions surrounding psychological aspects, more awareness and support can develop.

Here, we include the quotes of several athletes across the decades who raise awareness of these important aspects of being a runner.

The following section contains discussions related to mental health, eating disorders and body image. Some readers may find this content distressing or triggering. Please only proceed if you feel comfortable doing so.

“I realised that I needed running in my life, regardless of what level of running I was at. Coming back from injury I was only doing one session a week and that gradually built up to two sessions a week. The thing that was really difficult though, was learning to navigate my identity, starting at a new university, and not quite being able to say I was a runner, because I wasn’t running. I always loved having the identity of a runner and so it was difficult to adjust to during times of injury”. ~Anonymous Alumnus

“There are so many parts of my story that might never be said. High level sport can be, at times, really hard. The mental impact of being an elite athlete, the strains it can put on your relationships. It is tough, and that’s why it is so important to have a support network around you. I am so grateful for everyone who stood around me. I’ve had a lot of injuries during my running career, but the biggest injury I’ve had is mental.” ~Anonymous Alumnus

“Sometimes the mentality around sport can be destructive, and the men were affected by this mentality too I’d say. It can really disengage you from the sport long term, and that’s such a shame because we all do our sport because of the joys it gives you. A bad relationship with the sport can really destroy that joy, and some people end up leaving the sport completely. I’d like to think that there’s always a space for you in the running world when you do return though, and hopefully those people can fall in love with it all over again at a later stage in life”. ~Anonymous Alumnus

“I wasn’t as experienced as some of the others in my team, but I knew that the way they were treating their bodies wasn’t sustainable and wouldn’t serve their running aspirations well in the long term. It’s difficult to raise that kind of concern when the norm is simply to just follow the trend of skinny= fast. Even when you know in your gut that that’s not right. Some of the athletes had private coaches outside of Oxford. I remember one of them coming back from a coaching session and saying “He’s told me not to eat so much”. It’s shocking to hear that from a coach and it’s great that these

days that isn't really the attitude anymore. Coaches are more switched on in that area of athlete support, and luckily, that's not the advice a coach would or should give now." ~Anonymous Alumnus

"During times of injury its nice to reconnect with the sport in a more casual way. I grew to absolutely love parkruns. A lot of people around me would describe it as a 'chopper' thing to do, but I love it. I think its so important to be able to connect with all aspects of sport, not just the intense training, but also the casual enjoyment too" ~Anonymous Alumnus

"There were some athletes who, despite their talent were a little bit lost, I felt. There were people amongst my time that wanted to be great athletes, and really had the capability to be, but weren't being the best advised. In Oxford, this was a time without a decent coaching infrastructure, not like you seem to have now, and so we were really on our own. I, as a leader in the club, didn't know how to handle it and didn't have the expertise to tackle these issues at the time. I'm glad that now there is more support out there for this kind of thing". ~Anonymous Alumnus

"I think something that not that many people talk about is how hard it is leaving Oxford. Getting into Oxford is such a big deal, and you've done so well to get there, that there leaves a lot of expectations on you as to what happens next. You graduate, and all of a sudden there's the question of 'what now'. Often there is this expectation that you will walk out of your degree with a perfect job lined up. Being an Oxford student becomes part of your identity, and once you are on the other side of the tunnel you suddenly have to adjust". ~Anonymous Alumnus

"Its easy to rationalise eating thoughts. When you have fast role models, who are very thin and perhaps don't look like you. Its very easy to enter the mindset of 'If I look like them, then I can be fast like them' but that's not the case. It often requires quite a conscious and active change in mindset to break that pattern". ~Anonymous Alumnus

"Athletics clubs have become more serious about strength training now as well as nutrition. In our day it was all about mileage, which doesn't necessarily work for everyone. Today its more about strength and ensuring your body is in a position to take on the training load, before giving it the training load." ~Anonymous Alumnus

"Something like a protein shake wasn't heard of at the time. Some people would have home coaches and in those days it was quite common for them to say things like "You have to lose weight to improve, stop eating". Looking back, there was a lot of people who got caught up in all of that, not being guided properly and not getting nutritional advice like student-athletes do now. It was all about being skinny, and that's a real shame because a lot of people likely didn't reach their potential because of it. I felt like in my mind I knew that this was all associated with the recurrent injuries that I would see around me, but I didn't feel I had the gravitas to raise it. I think that's something that seems to be changing amongst the new generations. Its better talked about and hopefully that means it will be better tackled too". ~Anonymous Alumnus

"All through university there were athletes getting injuries. People were training hard and not eating enough, or not eating the right things, and it wasn't something that we were well educated about at the time, athlete fuelling. Many would train for hours in the morning, on an empty stomach" ~Anonymous Alumnus