



Name: Gill Suttle

College: St Hugh's

Years of Study: 1973 - 1976

Degree: Mathematics



Our next profile on this series is one that not all might expect to see in an OUCCC newsletter, as this name does not appear on the results of our XC Varsity series. This month's feature is, instead, an athlete who had a tremendous impact on the early years of female involvement in Oxford's running scene. This is the story of Gill Suttle, one of the first female members of OUAC (OUCCC was, during this time, a subset of OUAC) and a key player in the development of women's involvement in the clubs. She was the first Oxford woman to receive a full blue for running and went on to compete internationally in Modern Pentathlon.

Early Years:

Gill Suttle, already from a very young age, was enthused by running and sport.

"My first race was aged 4, in the tiny tots race at my brother's school sports day. I won, and got a prize of a shilling bar of Aero, the biggest bar of chocolate I'd ever seen. Naturally, that had me hooked on running for life."

Attending a school that was situated on a flood plain, school sports days became a rare occasion as the school field was, quite literally, under water. Athletics was on the school curriculum, but, by means of the weather, Gill left school having only the chance to participate in two school sports days. As such, it wasn't until University that racing competitively became a reality for her.

That said, her primary school sports teachers were encouraging of running, and introduced Gill to her first experience running in spikes.

"Before an inter-school meeting at Palmer Park, Reading, my sports teachers H. E. ("Highly Explosive") Green and Roy ("Nagger") Nash, took a sack from the back of the sports cupboard and emptied out a pile of black running spikes, from the same era as in "Chariots

of Fire". We all dived in and burrowed through them until we found a pair of our own size; then it was off to have our first taste of a proper cinder track. I was only 9, but I'll never forget the thrilling, sensuous feel of the spikes biting into the cinders. (A decade or two later I crashed in a 100H race at the same track, ploughing along the track until I was stopped by my nose fetching up against the next hurdle. Thank goodness, by then it was a tartan track!)"

University Life

Studying at St Hugh's as a keen mathematician, it was in her 2nd year of university that Gill became involved in University Running.

"It was the result of very good luck: in my second year, my college daughter was Julie Halfpenny, who was an athlete. That year OUAC was welcoming women for the first time, and we went together to one training session for a laugh... but then carried on going..."

Together, Julie and Gill became important members of the early women's running team, with Julie Wilson (nee Halfpenny) placing 4th in the unofficial XC Varsity match of 1975, and 3rd in the official XC Varsity match of 1976. *"OUAC instantly widened my circle of friends enormously. In particular, Julie and I became very good friends with Lynne Wightman, a friendship which lasted post-Oxford. I still see Steve White and Julian Goater occasionally at OUAC/Achilles functions"*.

Gill's impact on the early years of women's involvement in OUAC/OUCCC was vast, with team mates remembering her presence fondly: *"She was a significant figure in the women's team, a very important team mate who was also very motivating to be around"*. At a time where female membership was rather a lot lower than it is today, the overlap between XC runners and athletics events was significant. Gill competed in no less than 6 events in the very first Women's Athletics Varsity Match, carrying the team through both track and field disciplines.

At the time, Women's running events at Varsity included 100m, 100mH, 200m, 400m, 800m, 1500m, and 4x100m. To any distance runner, it might stand out that at the time the 5000m had not yet been introduced. To contextualise the events on offer for women, we look towards other athletics competitions at the time, and find that the opportunities in Oxford reflected those on the international stage. In 1964 the Olympic Women's 400m race was introduced for the first time, but it wasn't until 1972 that the 1500m and 4x400m races included a women's competition. Only in 1996 were women granted the opportunity to compete in an Olympic 5000m race. In Oxford, this was reflected in 1997 when the women's 5000m was introduced into the Athletics Varsity Matches, replacing the 3000m race that was introduced in 1984.

On this occasion when, for the first time, Oxford and Cambridge Women's Teams are to compete, the following message has been submitted by the President of the Achilles Club, the Rt. Hon. Philip Noel-Baker:-

"The Varsity Sports of 1975 will be an important event in the history of athletics; there will take place the entry of teams from the Women's Colleges into the life of the OUAC and CUAC, and soon, I hope, into the Achilles Club as well. I welcome this development on every ground; Women's Athletics have become one of the most attractive and most esteemed parts of the Olympic Games, and I am confident that Women's Athletics will have the same success in the Universities.

On behalf of the Achilles Club, I offer warm congratulations to all concerned.

The Rt. Hon. Philip Noel-Baker

May, 1975"

Excerpt from OUAC Varsity Programme



1976 OUAC Women's team photo. Sharing the same vests as worn in the 1976 XC varsity match.

Upon its inauguration in 1976, the first women's cross-country team was awarded a half blue status. The records show that at the time, a competing athlete could be awarded a Half-Blue if she finished ahead of the fourth scorer from the other side, whilst a Full Blue could be awarded if she went on to represent the British Universities internationally during the same season. This was in contrast to the men's rules, adopted in 1978, which gave the Captain discretion to award full blues to all members of the Blues team regardless of finishing position in the race. Nevertheless, Gill was encouraged by fellow athletes to apply to the Blues Committee for a full blue, on the strength of her running record on the track.

"It was duly granted, but I've often wondered whether it made its way into official records as there was no regular process at the time. I still have the letter telling me I'd got it! As far as I know I was the first woman to get a full blue for running (from Oxford, that is; a few years later I met a woman from CUAC at an RAF Cosford winter meeting, who had been awarded a Cambridge blue in the same way)."

Since those days, both the men's and women's blues criteria have undergone several changes, such that the current rules are the same regardless of gender (a full blue is awarded to all athletes who finish ahead of the 6th Cambridge finisher, and a half-blue awarded to the remaining athletes in the Blues Team).

Gill, with her many great successes on the track, had rather less luck when it came to cross country. Looking back at University cross-country races she recalls: *"I tried to compete, only to leave my spikes in the changing room- when I returned with them the field was already departing. I gave chase for one lap then threw in the towel"*. Even today Gill remembers the strength of character seen from cross country runners at the University, recalling that they were so determined they *'would have carried on even with a broken leg!'*

In her final year of university, Gill delved into the world of Modern Pentathlon, going on to represent GB at 2 world championships in 1978 and 1979 (Modern Pentathlon was not yet an Olympic sport at the time). In these world championships she finished 9th and 7th respectively, after which she returned to track running, this time focused upon the 400H event where she competed in the WAAAs in 1982.

"I also ran the event occasionally for Achilles, including a memorable trip to Ireland when I was press-ganged into running 400H, a straight 400 and a leg of the 4x4 all in one day. I

remember feeling sick for the rest of the day, and then discovering, on crawling into bed, that my bed only had three legs and I had to stagger down to the bar and beg a beer crate to prop it up”.



Gill at the World Championships 1978

Post University

Upon leaving university, Gill became a maths teacher: *“I taught Maths at Malvern Girls’ College for 13 years before crashing out with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME). Living with an illness that often prevented her from being physically active, Gill tried to find a vocation that could be worked on during the few hours in the occasional good weeks that she had. In doing so, Gill took to writing.*

“I’d started travel writing as a hobby before I became ill, and had had a few articles published. It seemed a natural path to continue when I could no longer function to order at prescribed times, and needed some sort of flexible work”

Gill’s success in this field led her to publish 4 books, give illustrated talks for various organisations and become a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, a testament to her writing accomplishments.

“Starting from writing from the perspective of the disabled traveller, I went on to more ambitious journeys in which I used horses to solve my problem with walking and my inability to carry luggage. My specialities are Syria, Central Asia and Mongolia, but I also cover Iran and Oman. Unfortunately the places I would recommend most are Syria and Turkmenistan – the former, one of the most fascinating countries in the world from many different perspectives but totally inaccessible, the latter still accessible but now only via highly controlled tours. That moves Mongolia into first place!

Upon rescuing a starving stallion in Turkmenistan in 1999, Gill found more than just companionship in the horse, whereby ‘Kaan’ became a mobility aid for her travels far and wide. With a debt of gratitude for the Akhal-Teke stallion, Gill made it her mission to ensure he could live a long and happy life, free from the ill-treatment and malnutrition he had experienced in earlier life, so dedicated 3 years to his rescue and bringing him home with her. Pivotal to this escape journey, was the horse’s breeder, Geldy Kyarizov, a future political prisoner and Turkmen Horse Minister who himself endured time in a notorious Turkmen prison. He, against all odds is now a Czech citizen, whilst Gill’s horse Kaan, made it to Britain. Once in the UK, Kaan carried out the 500 mile Odyssey for ME, partnered by 19 riders and raising £14,000 for ME research during a ride from the South Coast to Scotland, via the Welsh borders. He has 26 descendants, covering 4 generations, fulfilling Gill’s dream of founding a line of sport horses.



OUCCC Alumni and Olympic Pentathlete Steph Cook, with Kaan during the Odyssey

Gill began breeding horses, which would compete under the guidance of good, though inexperienced, young riders. That was, until, about 7 years ago, when “*a brilliant ME doctor, who has done pioneering research, restored to me about half my lost capacity*”. The result? Gill can now train her own horses (intermittently) and, in a good year, compete them. “*In 2019 I had my first season eventing since 1986, and managed another in 2021*”. As Gill undertakes her journey of regaining a greater sense of physical ability she has returned to her role as a teacher. “*I’m back teaching Maths (just a few pupils), just as all my contemporaries are retiring!*” Of course, running remains a passion that has endured throughout her life and the running journey continues today.

“I’m now learning to run again! Not much, just 15-20 strides gently downhill on a good day.”



Gill back eventing in 2021

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