



**Sian Brice:** (née Pilling)

**Matriculation years:** 1987-1991

**College:** Queen's

**Degree:** Biochemistry



*“OUCCC and running was a huge part of my life at University. It’s the best thing I could ever have wished for as a university experience in sport”*

### **Early Years**

Sian grew up as a keen sportswoman on the Isle of Man. Already at a young age, she was a talented athlete, travelling far and wide to compete in a multitude of sports.

*“Growing up on the Isle of Man meant that travelling to competitions was always a long commute! Even county champs cross country required a four hour boat journey or a plane to get there!”*

For sixth form, Sian moved to Somerset where she attended Millfield School on a running scholarship.

*“I was a swimmer and also played basketball a lot as a child- I wasn’t technical but I could run fast! My fitness really played to my advantage on the court. When I made my first English Schools 1500m final (age 13), I was actually only running once a week. As a national level swimmer, I was training 6 times a week in the pool so had a big aerobic base that I could work from”.*

It wasn't long before Sian was crowned National Biathlon Champion and went on to win the English Schools Championships for the 1500m. Already at this young age, Sian had earned her place on the international stage, competing first at Home Nations, World School Games and U18/U21 1500m Internationals.

In 1986 Sian competed at her first Commonwealth Games (1500m) despite only being in 6<sup>th</sup> form. Of the same age category was also the then-junior Kelly Holmes. Together, Sian and Kelly were the only Juniors to qualify for the AAAs final that year.

### **Joining OUCCC**

*“I was an experienced runner by the time I joined university. I gravitated straight away to the running clubs, and it was an easy decision to know where I belonged. Looking back, I have the most romantic memories of OUCCC as an entity: the experience of what it felt like to be part of OUCCC and also what OUCCC stood for”.*

Sian immediately immersed herself into the student-athlete lifestyle at Oxford. With a background in both cross-country and athletics, she made her Oxford debut in Michaelmas, competing at both the freshers Varsity Athletics match, and the Blues Cross Country Match at Wimbledon Common (placing 2<sup>nd</sup> behind teammate Vicki Vaughan). For Sian however, memories of the Varsity series consist not just of racing, but of the key moments that came before and after the races.



1989 Blues Varsity Match Winners

*“It was the teas after races that I loved the most. They just epitomised the down to earth nature of OUCCC. If we ever had an XC or track meet we would always have tea in the stands above the track (a space now occupied by the blues performance gym). We’d be on the top floor with those big windows looking out onto the track, with a pile of 20+ loaves of bread, making sandwiches en masse. It didn’t matter that we’d perhaps be racing 2 hours later, because our key priority was getting those 100s of sandwiches through our production line of helpers. I remember after II-IVs at Shotover everyone came down to Iffley Road afterwards and the piles high of sandwiches would get consumed”.*

On some occasions, not even a group of hungry runners could finish off the quantity of sandwiches that had been made, and Sian and her teammates would cycle back into town and deliver the remaining food to the homeless.

*“I remember once cycling behind Larry Matthews, both of us with bags of sandwiches that we were taking to a spot not far from the clock tower. Unfortunately, one of the bags ripped and we ended up with sandwich contents trailing behind us on our route. It’s a memory that I love because it just goes to show the simplicity of it all. We were just trying to get things done and never overcomplicated things”.*

Sian recalls another such simple tradition with joy, looking back on the longstanding use of a bag of flour to create the start line for the Shotover Varsity match. A tried and tested method that has stuck through time, dark and light blue athletes even today begin their Varsity race with their spikes lined up against the flour line. *“It’s one of the things I love. Back to basics. Practical and wonderful. That’s what it’s all about”.*



*Pre-season training camp at the New Forrest after a game of frisbee*

### **OUCCC Life**

*“The thing about OUCCC is that it all came together really well because it was the students themselves who ran the club and still do today. We were always in it together and with everyone so invested in what we were doing, no wonder it was such a wonderful community to be a part of”.*

### **Training**

During Sian’s time at Oxford, there was no employed club coach, rather, a key figure in the club, Larry Matthews, alongside the wider committee would organise the training sessions. Typically, Monday sessions would consist of three-minute reps around University Parks, a centrally convenient place especially for STEM students, like Sian, who would attend between their labs.

*“Training sessions were always the place to be, and I was very lucky to have a lab partner for whom sport was a priority too. We would always cover for each other. Usually around lunch time, I’d head off to Uni Parks, bash out a session, do a quick change in the bathroom toilets and hurry back to the lab where I’d have to secretly try and get my lunch in too. My lab partner would cover for me and then we’d trade places, and I’d cover for him whilst he headed off to his football training. It’s a wonder we made it through, and I dare say we might have had to borrow other people’s results from time to time!”*

That said, Sian emphasized the importance of the work-sport balance, citing that not only was sport a great way to take a break from work, but it was also important to take time away from training. *“You can’t run all day, and you need to take time away from sport too. It’s important to have a distraction from running, and so the balance of both, complimented each other well”.*

Battling with injury during her time at Oxford, Sian recalls the distinct differences between facilities during her Oxford experience and today.

*“We didn’t have gyms or a swimming pool at the Sports Centre during my time, and that would’ve been a great help to me. As a runner, a key thing I would always recommend is that you spend a lot of time making your body as strong as possible. Core is so important, and so yoga and pilates can be incredibly helpful in ensuring you have the lower leg strength that you need to be able to tolerate running impact. When I had injuries at Uni I would cycle to Temple Cowley at 6am in order to swim in an open session there. Alternatively, I’d take my bike and cycle around the ring road (with my*

*basket on!). At the time, I'd be cycling with my Sony Walkman around my ears, but I wouldn't recommend that to anyone now! Of course, a key part of rehabilitation is physiotherapy, and I ended up having large expenses going towards this. At times, I'd be lucky enough to find people sympathetic to running and they would offer me discounts. I remember one physio felt bad that we had such limited facilities at Iffley and so gave me free physio!"*

Today, students are lucky to have access to swimming facilities and a gym at Iffley Road sports centre. But as technology moves on and facilities improve elsewhere, the comparison between Oxford and leading sports universities like Birmingham and Loughborough reveals significant gaps. Access to existing facilities as well as physio access for injury is a typical financial burden for students today, as the costs associated with participation in sport rise.

### The Committee

*"Within a week of being at Oxford I already realised that OUCCC was a very inclusive place. I think I came in with a bit of a reputation, I had just won English Schools, but it didn't matter how good you were. People were just people and everyone was really friendly".*

Women's involvement in the sports committees and in leadership roles was continually growing in Oxford. *"My friend Liz Hobson was a bit of a trailblazer when it came to female leadership. She became the first female president of OUAC, and she was a real role model to break through that barrier. In OUCCC I found the men were really forthcoming and wanted to get the women involved as much as possible, particularly encouraging us to get involved in the committee. What was really great as well was that you did not have to be the best runner in order to get involved. There were some great athletes around who were part of it, but so was everyone else and it didn't matter how fast you ran".*

Sian recalls that one of her favourite things to do as Captain was the recruitment of teams for the annual Varsity Match.

*"There were some people in our team, like Emma, that were so full of life and so enthusiastic that there was never a question of pushing them to get involved. Some people on the other hand were not initially so sure. I remember I would literally go to people's rooms in order to recruit them, and the most satisfying thing was when they came to the race, took part, and absolutely loved it. Often, it would be that 'Type 2' kind of fun, when actually the most amazing feeling is when its over- but even that was a joy to see".*

As captain, Sian loved to sell the joys of cross-country running to even the non-regular runners, getting a particular thrill from seeing an immense turn out of people at the Varsity Mob Matches. She was therefore excited to hear that the Mob Match continues to be an ever-growing mass-participation match, which in its most recent edition saw 264 participants.

*"Not only is the atmosphere at a Varsity Match so great, it's also that after glow (I call it 'Ski Glow') you get when you've finished exercising. When you've been out in the elements, you've got that endorphin rush and you end up with this wonderful glow about you. That glow just lasts for hours and that is so beautiful to me.*

***Cross country is one of my favourite sports ever and part of that is because it gives you the freedom to run wildly. It is so relaxed. It is so freeing. All you need is shoes.***

*When competing in Triathlon I was always so relieved when I got to the running section. Triathlon is great but things can go wrong technically- you can get a puncture, you can crash your bike. For me there was always a sense of relief when I got to the running section, because it meant I knew I was going to finish- even if I had to crawl! The simplicity of it just being you and your running shoes. You can do it anywhere and so cross country is still my favourite".*

## OUCCC Life

*“OUCCC was such a community. Everyone was so inclusive and so friendly so we became very close. One of my very good friends was Jo Dering, with whom I lived together in my fourth year. She was a bridesmaid at my wedding and became the godmother of my son. Having her as a friend made life so enjoyable and also made the study/running balance easier to manage. We would train together and also study together at one another’s colleges”.*

Sian recalls the social nature of OUCCC, with a cross country house once again reappearing amongst its members. *“The Abingdon Road cross country house was a big meeting point for all of us. The house consisted of Kenny Stirrat, Simon Mugglestone, Tommy Richardson, Mark Evans (we called him Waster) and Ian McAllister. They all lived together, and we’d hang out there all the time. I think I even celebrated my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party in their house!”*



1989 Post-Varsity Fun

*“Whilst in OUCCC I was also lucky enough to meet my now husband Paddy, who was a Cambridge runner. We had met many times over the years at races like Varsity and BUCS, and there were always sparks, but with technology and texting not being what it is today, it wasn’t until my final year at university that we got together.*

*One distinct memory I have, which my father retold on our wedding day, was from the year that I organised Teddy Hall Relays. I was standing up on the officials’ steps looking over the track where all the teams were congregating at and, to my surprise, turned to see four Cambridge men all wearing vests with my face printed on them! Under the print, were the words “Sian Pilling Appreciation Society” and I couldn’t stop laughing. The team made it onto the podium and results were printed in the Telegraph. Soon after I got a call from my dad, back in the Isle of Man, who had seen the results in the newspaper and was intrigued to hear about what was going on. The drama of it all never fails to amuse me!*

*Eventually, my dad did meet him for the first time at Wimbledon Common (only for him to race straight past my dad 3 times before being able to say hello). You can see that OUCCC really was my life- it wasn’t just the running and competitions but the people and the memories that were core to it all”.*



*Teddy Hall Relays: Cambridge University Sian Pilling Appreciation Society*

### The Elite Athlete

When Sian started University, she was already a competitive athlete, having competed nationally and internationally as a junior. Arriving in Oxford, she joined other impressive athletes of the time, including Simon Mugglestone, Tommy Richardson, Kenny Stirrat, Vicki Vaughan and would later become close friends with the late Jo Dering.

As an athlete with high ambition, Sian was glad to find a training partner and friend in teammate Jo Dering. Together, they would travel to Andover for their track-based training sessions where they were coached by Phil Banning, a formerly recognised GB junior and then Welsh middle distance coach.

*“OUCCC didn’t have formal coaching at the time. Jo and I would travel to Andover on week day evenings and Saturdays for track sessions but would stick with the Oxford group for our long reps/runs. The slightly separated training regime didn’t affect the social side of things as we were already an established group and would continue to hang out.”*

Whilst at Oxford, Sian was part of the double-gold BUSA (now BUCS) streak of 1988 and 1989, where the women’s team stormed their way to 2 consecutive national victories.

*“I remember our BUCS Gold at St Andrews. For the occasion it was nice that Oxford and Cambridge would gravitate together. We’d go from rivals to friends, and it was great to be cheering each other on at the non-varsity races! We would become particularly close on those joint trips like the IVY league tour to America, which was such an amazing trip. I still almost pinch myself that that really happened! We were so lucky to have that experience and the friendships we made are still there today. I can see that through my son even, who went travelling in Australia and got ill whilst out there- some*

*of the Cambridge guys whom I befriended now live in Sydney and were able to help out. The people you meet through OUCCC and Varsity, whatever level you are at, are really special. I feel very lucky about that”.*

During her university days, Sian was able to celebrate some significant running achievements, competing at the World University Cross Country Championships with her teammate Vicki Vaughan, and in doing so winning a team silver medal. Despite her successes however, Sian felt she was never quite able to fulfil her potential whilst at university, due to her recurrent injuries. She was keen to go to America to give a professional running career a go, looking towards Claire Lavers, a Cambridge athlete, as someone who had paved the way before her.

Following her year at the University of Alabama on a running scholarship, she returned to the London and became an accountant. It was here that she became familiar with the rapidly growing sport of triathlon and joined one of London’s established clubs. She found that doing three sports together allowed her to balance her running and cross training effectively.

*“It was a natural progression for me. I found that too much running would cause me injury, and I was already quite a good swimmer. I hadn’t done triathlon as a combination sport at university because it didn’t exist as an Oxford University Club at the time. Instead, I did them separately. I was on the blues swimming team, and obviously did my running. Cycling was a regular cross training activity for me. Triathlon as a sport in its own right is a different ball game though. In retrospect, had I been doing it at University I would have struggled with the time commitment. Cycling and Swimming are very time consuming and it’s hard to fully commit to it if you aren’t training full time”.*

Sian’s Elite Sports career saw many international appearances around the turn of the millennium. Taking up triathlon competitively in 1993, it was within just four years that Sian won the European Cup Final. By 1999, she saw a 6<sup>th</sup> place finish at the World Championships, Montreal and a 4<sup>th</sup> place finish at the World Cup, Rio de Janeiro the following year. The year 2000 featured further World Championships, European Championships and finally the Olympic Games, Sydney

These Olympic Games were a special year for OUCCC, fielding three of OUCCC’s four Olympians in the very same year.

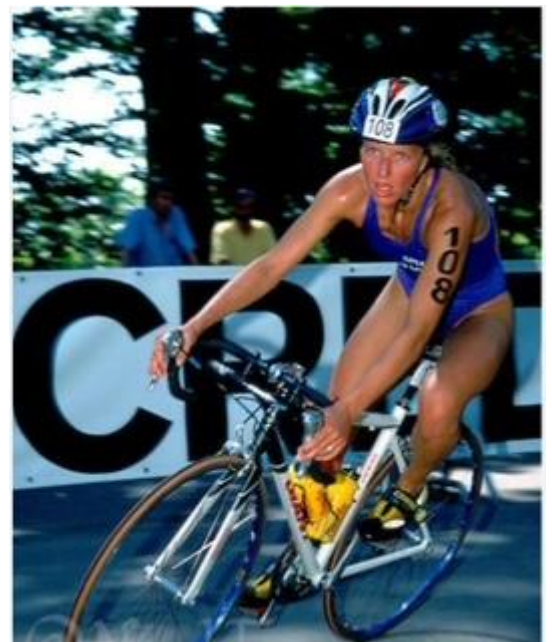
#### **OUCCC’s Four Female Olympians:**

**Sian Brice (nee Pilling);** Queen’s; **Triathlon** (2000)

**Stephanie Cook;** Lincoln; **Modern Pentathlon** (2000)

**Emily de Riel;** University College; **Modern Pentathlon** (2000)

**Mara Yamauchi (nee Myers);** St Anne’s; **Marathon** (2008)



*Sian competing at the World Cup 1999*

## Professional Sport and Beyond

Since retiring as a professional athlete, Sian has continued to challenge herself in other ways, including completing the Lanzarote Ironman, Marathon de Sables and, most recently, the Haute Route Pyrenees (5 days of mountain cycling) with her husband.

Today, sport remains a big part of Sian's life predominantly in the form of coaching.

*“I am a coach now and it gives me enormous pleasure to be able to empower people to achieve their own personal milestones in sport. I have a cycling group of mostly middle-aged women, who come from a range of backgrounds, some of whom have never been sporty before. We meet twice a week, all wearing our matching tops, and cycle as a group. People take on all sorts of challenges, whether it's a 55k cycle or a trip all the way from Land's End to John O Groats. They constantly want to up their game. For me, it's about growing their confidence and creating a great community.”*



Sian crossing the finish line of the Haute Route Pyrenees

Sian talks of her role as a facilitator of a sporting community that continues to grow and the positivity that spreads from the ability to achieve your goals.

*“I have this vision of a community that empowers people. Anything you do, any action you take, is a positive step. Even if a certain day doesn't go well, you've still done it and that is a positive thing. I want people to embrace that. In general, I think that's what sport should be all about.*



Sian's cycling group

Sian is also involved in swim coaching for younger children, where her passion lies with encouraging body positivity within sport.

*“Particularly within swimming there are, unfortunately, times when athletes are made to feel badly about their body shape, sometimes by coaches, and that is a really difficult thing. I was lucky to not worry about that whilst I was growing up, but it's important to me that no-one needs to go through something like that”.*

Sian still retains links with her Isle of Man childhood. She has fond memories of the annual Isle of Man running festival, having taken part from age 12 as a local race. She and her mum still make the annual trip to Peel for the hill race, where she witnessed this year's Oxford Helicopters racing (current students Rebecca Flaherty and Rhiannon Paton took 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the overall competition).

Concluding our interview, Sian summarised her lasting memories of OUCCC

*“The friendliness of OUCCC is my lasting memory. What could have just been a means of training, instead became my life. I found that my best and most lasting friendships were found through the club, rather than college. We spent so much time together, and shared so much: the highs, the lows, the elation and the injuries. We did it all together.*

*Cross country is my favourite sport but unfortunately my ongoing hip injury has stopped me from running recently. Once I've had my hip operation I hope to get back into it and when I do the biggest treat for me will be entering some cross-country races!”*