

Food for thought

Fitting in fodder before that big race.

Many of the cross country meetings that we go to these days are held on a Sunday morning. So if you've had a good meal on the previous evening, all you need on the morning of the race is a light but sustaining breakfast at least 2 hours before the start. The big meetings such as the national or the inter-counties are rather different. The senior men are usually off last but for everyone else you can be racing at any time between 11 am and 2.30 or so pm. We've had a couple of instances this season where people maybe haven't eaten the right thing at the right time, and it might just have made a difference to their performance. They are not the first to be caught out, and they won't be the last.

Even as recently as the 1980s, races were usually held on Saturday afternoons, so we got used to being ready to run at that time. It's a case of looking at what time your race starts and working back from there. That and only that determines when you can eat during the day. Kick off with a good breakfast first thing. Stick with things that you know won't upset your stomach, taking pre-race nerves into account - you don't want to queue for the loos more often than you have to. And make sure there are some slow-release carbohydrates such as porridge in there. Don't go for a massive sugar hit because that will have worn off before you get to the course. Then have a light snack no less than 3 hours before the race. Again go for slow release carbs. Ignore standard mealtimes and what your support crew is doing. It may only be a couple of hours after breakfast, and you may not feel hungry (although most distance runners can usually find some space by that time). What you need is the fuel to see you through until after the race. Muesli and coffee suited me, but it is an individual thing. Eat in the car if you have to (not while driving of course). What you don't want is pangs of hunger when you are warming up, especially if you are daft enough to do it downwind of the doughnut van. And don't rely on something suitable being available when you get there.

So give it some thought next time you're in one of the big meetings. If it works, that's great, you'll know what to do next time. If it doesn't, think again.

And when the race is over you can line up for that well-deserved doughnut.