

# Ilford's long-distance hero Catton has been battling a new foe in Coronavirus

sport

Bowls

**The future of some of our bowls clubs may well be thrown into question after the sport closed down because of the Coronavirus pandemic.**

Following a meeting of Bowls England two weeks ago, all national competitions have been cancelled for 2020.

And with county competitions leading to National Finals at Leamington at the end of the summer that means they have been cancelled as well.

John Tully, the county competition secretary, said: "Once Bowls England made their announcement following government advice, the counties had little choice but to follow suit.

"Our county competitions start in May in order to qualify for the national competitions and there is no way we will be able to get back on to the greens by then.

"We have delayed a decision on the lesser county events like the secretary's cup, the county shield and the unbadged singles, until the end of June, but we may have to cancel those too."

Other than war time, this is the first year that the county events will not be held since it began in 1909. There was no competition between 1914-16 and 1940-44, but the singles did return in 1945.

Perhaps the more serious side of these decisions could be on the smaller clubs in the area.

"The big clubs like Wanstead Central, Romford and Essex County will certainly survive, but I have serious concerns for some of the smaller clubs," said Tully.

"I know that the council has already shut down all the greens in Thurrock and there is already talk about them not coming back.

"Our clubs have been struggling for members for a long time and this may well be the year when people think they will no longer bother to renew and that would be a real shame."

It means the chance of overthrowing Andy Squire, the six-time county singles champion, will have to wait for another year, while club officers like President Sandy Dron (Upminster) and deputy Dave King (Romford) will remain in office until 2021.

"These are difficult times with nobody being able to play bowls," said Tully.

"All we can hope for is that the virus subsides more quickly than some are suggesting."

Whether that is in time for some of the clubs in Essex remains to be seen.

Athletics

DAVE EVANS  
dave.evans@archant.co.uk

**These are certainly testing times. A nice feature on local athlete Andy Catton on his many years at Ilford Athletics Club took a different turn right from the off of our conversation.**

"Myself and my wife Sheila have been in quarantine for nearly two weeks after contracting the Coronavirus," said the 66-year-old when I got him on the phone.

Blimey, I wasn't expecting that, although in these unprecedented times I suppose it was an inevitable occurrence.

"We haven't been tested but we both definitely have had it," he continued.

"The thing about having it is you feel so physically drained. I went and cut the grass yesterday because I felt much better, but after I did that I was shattered for the next couple of hours.

"Both me and my wife are physically fit which has certainly helped. My lung capacity is good and that has meant that I have had no breathing troubles."

It is clear this virus can prey on anybody, but whatever your age, if you are as fit as an athlete like Catton you are going to recover from it.

It has been a remarkable athletic career at Ilford AC for over 50 years for Catton, during which time he has rewritten the club record books in no uncertain terms.

"I joined Ilford on my 11th birthday in 1964," he said. "My godfather Edgar Moon who was an important part of the club came round to my house and presented me with my membership card.

"My father Jim was also a member and a good athlete so I guess it was in the genes."

It certainly was. As well as a some fine and patient coaching, Catton became one of the leading lights in the club, especially over the longer distances.

"I was only eight stone 11 or 12 and very thin with a big lung capacity and a resting heartbeat of around 25-30 beats a minute, so I was ideally suited to longer distances right up to the marathon," he said.

A glance at the Ilford record books certainly bears that out.

At every distance from 5k to marathon, he is either number one or number two on their all-time list, a statistic he is certainly proud of.

"I suppose my 5,000 metre record was probably the most impressive, but taking the club marathon record from an Ilford



Andy Catton on the seafront during the Essex Road Relays.

Picture: ILFORD AC



Andy Catton with two of Ilford's promising youngsters (left) and pounding the pavement (right).



Pictures: ILFORD AC

legend like Dennis Plater was really pleasing," he said.

That came at the London Marathon way back in 1985 when he clocked an admirable two hours 19 minutes and four seconds, a formidable time even today.

It has been a remarkable athletics career for Catton and all of it at Ilford – and he is not planning to stop yet.

"Ilford is a unique club," he said. "It has never changed its base, never merged with another club and we will celebrate the centenary in 2023. The best thing for me has been the camaraderie and the friends you make that make Ilford such a special club."

And going forward there seems

to be plenty of talent coming through.

"We have some great youngsters at the club and though it does take a bit of luck to get them, but a lot of it is word of mouth," he said.

"They all train together and what is more they are a great bunch of lads. We have also seen athletes like Paul Grange come to the club and he has just run the second fastest 800m for a 40-year-old in the UK."

Of course, that has now all ground to a halt with a virus that has certainly hit Catton on a personal level.

"It is such a tough thing to run an athletics club," he said. "It is like six different sports in one and

takes a lot of organisation. I'm also on the county athletics board and it has been so depressing having to cancel all the events for the summer, but there is no alternative."

Most people are stuck at home but Catton is sure everyone can get a bit of exercise while they are there, as long as they are careful.

"There are a lot of things you can still do off the internet to try and keep fit, but most of us can get out and have a walk or a bike ride and it is important," he said.

"I am looking forward to getting back out there soon."

And that is the sort of attitude that will win this war against the virus.