

# Ilford athletics legend Batchelor finally has to call it a day after over 60 years

## Athletics

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**One of the greatest servants to any athletics club is finally bringing his illustrious sporting career to an end after a marathon effort of 63 years!**

Athletics can be a tough old business as veteran Ilford AC runner John Batchelor can testify to.

The first race he had was over 100 yards when Batchelor was just nine-years-old in the Wolf Cubs – when he fell flat on his face after being tripped up.

Two years ago, his last international appearance was in the 800m at the European Masters in Madrid.

Leading into the final straight, he hit the wall and once again ended up flat on his face.

In between those two races, John has had a magnificent career in the sport and only now at the age of 79 years young is he being forced to hang up his spikes.

“I joined the Ilford club in 1957, which was down to member Edgar Moon, whose father Alan had been one of the founders of the club back in 1923,” he said.

“Before that I was at Buckhurst Hill Grammar School. I was not very sporty, didn’t like football, but running was cheap, you just needed a pair of plimsolls.

“I remember one of my mum’s friends watching me going out on training runs and saying to her, ‘at least it keeps him off the streets’ which is ironic as running on the streets was exactly what I was doing!

“At school we had a really good cross-country team which I eventually made in my last two years there and I managed to become the school champion in my final year.”

That prompted Ilford AC to come calling and it was when he began training with Ilford legend Dennis Plater that his career really took off.

“I used to do training runs with Dennis and I learned such a lot,” said Batchelor.

“Then he met a young Scot called Fergus Murray while he was on holiday in Edinburgh and persuaded him to come and join us at Ilford.”

Murray went on to run for Great Britain in the 10,000 metres at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo.

“The three of us ran together and I got better and better and built up more and more stamina.”

That period in the Sixties was a vintage time for Ilford and Batchelor.

He, Plater and Murray took on



John Batchelor leads the Vancouver Trophy at Woodford Green.



John Batchelor with Mel Batty in the Essex 20-miler (left) and in cross-country action in 1970 (right).



John Batchelor (far left) on the podium at the Jean Bouin 10k road race in Barcelona, won by Coventry’s Juan Taylor. Barcelona’s Franciso Aritmendi was third.

all the local events, racing the likes of the legendary international Mel Batty as well as an American based in London called Buddy Ederlen.

“I had a real purple patch in the mid Sixties,” he recalled. “I was second in the Dagenham Town Show 5-miler and actually won that in 1964.

Barcelona, finishing in a fine second place, but his hopes of a place in the Commonwealth Games were dashed at the trial.

He had competed in a 20-miler just the week before and did not have the energy to do it all over again.

Batchelor worked at May & Baker in Dagenham, before being persuaded by Murray to move to Edinburgh to study for a PhD in Chemistry.

He added: “The university had a very good cross-country team which I was going to join, but just before I went up there I injured my knee.

“In the two years I was up there, I couldn’t race at all, just sort out the team’s fixtures, which was a shame.”

Batchelor returned to London and got a job at the Wellcome Research Laboratories in Beckenham, South London, where he also moved to, retiring at the age of 54.

But there was no chance that Batchelor was going to abandon Ilford AC when he moved.

“I never thought for a moment that I would change clubs,” he said.

“Most of the time I would go north of the river for training runs along the canal paths and I was still running in Ilford colours.”

Batchelor married Miki, a former Serbian figure skating champion who had arrived from Yugoslavia in 1968, and they have a daughter, Nina, who works in the health service.

And it is health that has finally ended Batchelor’s athletics career.

“I developed an atrial flutter of the heart, which meant that my heartbeat became really fast and I would be liable to a stroke if I carried on,” he said.

“I started to find running really tough and though I would recover quickly, it got to the point where it was better to call it a day.”

John certainly looks kindly on all those years at Ilford.

“It has been a real joy to be part of this club for so long. The thing about it is that in my 30s, 40s, 50s and the rest, there was always a great mix of people of all ages to talk to.

“I have enjoyed every minute of it and meeting Dennis Plater and Fergus Murray changed my life completely and that is down to Ilford AC,” he said.

John, and fellow veteran Pam Jones, will be joint presidents for the club’s centenary celebrations in 2023 and talk of Pam brings him another fond memory.

“One of the reasons that I joined Ilford rather than Woodford Green for instance was because it was a mixed club,” he said.

“I remember when the women went on a tour to Sweden and came back with these white leotards. They couldn’t compete in them, but I remember them training in them and Pam was one of them! She hasn’t changed a bit!”

A lifetime of memories, a lifetime of success on track, road and mud, John Batchelor will forever be recognised as an Ilford AC legend.

“I did a personal best by 44 seconds in the two-mile race, also in the 10-miler, while me and Dennis ran the Essex six-mile championships in 1965 against Edeler.

“It was at Mayesbrook Park and me and Dennis decided to run as a team, but he couldn’t keep up the pace and so it was left to me against Buddy.

“With about 600 to go, I could hear the tannoy say it was going to be a close finish, so I thought I had better speed up and see what happens and the crowd watching cheered me on to victory.

“It was the pinnacle of my career to win in front of the home crowd cheering me on. It was a good job there were no drugs tests in those days because I had improved so much that I definitely would have been tested!” he laughed.

Batchelor also competed for Great Britain alongside Batty in