

2024 has seen a record number of "Couchies" graduate from Deestridders Running Club's Couch to 5k programme. 20 completed the 11 week course, with most of those taking on "The 5k" at Chester parkrun on 23 March 2024.

Starting in January, people wishing to get off the couch and start or return to running were able to do so with Deestridders on Tuesday and Thursday nights. The progressive sessions on the Deeside cycle path, supported by club members, saw periods of walking increasingly replaced by running. Some Deestridders organised weekend sessions for the third run of the week to be done as a group. The Couchies threw themselves into the task with determination, some managing the full distance before the 11 weeks were up (the fact that head coach Nige Parr didn't always blow his whistle exactly when a run portion was supposed to end clearly had nothing to do with their rapid increase in ability to cover the distance!).

Graduation on Chester's B course was a jubilant occasion, and it was wonderful to hear the personal stories of the former Couchies. Elaine Thomson told how she signed up "for support with my running journey as I gave up too easily when tired. Boy, did this group deliver... I feel I could now progress to running more than a 5k." She ran a 32:26 on the big day, taking over two minutes off her previous best.

Abby Thurland decided to give running a go after a shoulder injury put paid to her gym training. Despite having never run before starting Couch to 5k, her natural talent shone through as she covered the parkrun in 30:20. She said "I'm really proud of what I and all the other Couchies have achieved but we couldn't have done it without the support and encouragement of the Deestridders!"

Phill Bryan, who ran his parkrun PB of 30:53 on the day, started out not being remotely interested in running. When he eventually opted for a healthier lifestyle a couple of years ago he made several abortive attempts at Couch to 5k before trying the programme at his brother Graham's club. Spurred on by the support of all involved he went on to run 5k in under 30 minutes and even completed the Chester 10k two weeks ago. Having discovered the "runner's high" he wants to continue doing this "for as long as my legs will let me."

Corinne Wardle, who also ran a personal best (34:28), shared that she had lost a lot of confidence socially after spending a year in hospital with her sick baby daughter, who is thankfully now well. "This has given me a reason to get out of the house and meet people. My fitness is improving all the time and I feel more accountable to be present and get better due to everyone in the group all wanting the same thing. Is a fab group! So glad I came."

Graduates now have the opportunity to continue their running journey with Deestridders if they so choose, with two 5k groups available for training on Tuesday and Thursday nights that they could now go straight into. One is led at a sociable pace and the other is more progressive for those looking to increase their pace and distance.

Deestridders are proud of every "Couchie of 2024", for whom the next chapter is just beginning.