



nature matters

by Martin Lines

Hitting the ground running

I've just returned from a weekend in London, supporting my daughter who was running her first London Marathon as well as the thousands of others who were also taking part. On the journey home I began to reflect on the achievements of all those who crossed the finish line.

Running a marathon from A to B is much like farming and the current agricultural transition from one payment structure and focus to another. As a farmer, the big difference is – we're not sure where or if there is a finishing line...

All the groups of runners assemble at different points to start their race. You have the elite athletes that set off at pace and with determination to be the first to cross the line. Equally, many farms have been nature-friendly for generations and farming regeneratively in tandem with nature and sequestering carbon.

Then, there are the thousands who've run many races in the past and know exactly what to expect — fast runners but not professional athletes and who are hoping for a personal best. Of course there are many experienced farmers who use fewer inputs, restore some habitat for nature, plant trees

and think ahead.

And then there's the tens of thousands of people setting off in large groups to complete the race in their own personal best times, some walking the course because that's their limit – a very slow pace but determined to cross the line.

In agriculture, some farmers require advice on climate resilience and helping nature but have to start somewhere. They're perhaps not sure what their farm business plan is yet but are learning on the job because they know they must.

For the marathon, everyone comes together from different backgrounds and opportunities – some are less able, some have personal challenges, but they all are there for the common goal of crossing the line. As a spectator, we get to watch and cheer on the runners.

Very soon after the masses start coming past we see pacesetters with flags aloft, stating the time in which they'll complete the marathon: "If you tuck in and follow me, I'll get you across the line in four hours." In agriculture, maybe it's the agronomist that'll guide farmers through the steps they require to cross the line?

Some runners have sponsorship from the latest flashy brands to help them in their training. They're bombarded with adverts for the latest technology trainers, sports drinks and supplements that they simply must have to complete the race. In farming we have new pesticides, GM varieties, expensive new technologies and upgraded machinery.

These might seem like quick fixes, and there may be a psychological benefit, but at what cost? Do these things really make for a better

marathon runner or in our case, are these tools sustainable solutions?

Now the crowd gets very noisy, cheering the runners, shouting out names and encouraging those who look like they're struggling. There are loud cheers as those dressed up in costumes go past, those with fridges and other items attached to themselves. Runners, cheering other runners.

This is just like the farming communities who show their support — the farm shop is busy, the school visit proves a success, volunteers come and help with the tree planting.

In the real-life farming marathon, most farmers are running as fast as they can but may not have made the right preparations for the race they now find themselves in. They recognise where they're heading but may be derailed and dazzled by adverts and products available to make their race quicker and easier...but at whose expense?

Are these sticking plasters? There are farmers that haven't prepared and they begin to raise their voices to express how difficult it is and that

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it may not be achievable. They're not sure if they even want to be in this race with no end.

But, they'll be encouraged along by a crowd of supporters and the willingness of everyone to help each other – we're all on the same journey after all. Runners cheering runners, farmers cheering farmers, communities coming together in support.

Our agricultural system is transitioning to deliver food production alongside climate resilience and nature recovery; which runner are you in this race?



Running a marathon is much like farming.