

ENGLISH ROAD RUNNING ASSN MEN'S 12 and WOMEN'S 6-STAGE
ROAD RELAYS and YOUNG ATHLETES 5km CHAMPIONSHIPS, Sutton
Park, April 6

City of Leeds and Thames Valley Harriers won the men's and women's events, respectively, as the races took place in relatively mild weather but very strong winds thanks to the Irish named storm Kathleen.

There were gusts of over 40-miles-per-hour on the way back from Streetley Gate on the long stage, although the short laps were slightly sheltered.

Despite the top 25 teams from each area and some other home country entrants the total teams competing in the men's race were significantly lower.

Men

Leeds had packed their middle order with experience that eventually yielded a three-and-a-half-minute victory over Bristol & West. The third team medal went down to the wire and it was just taken by 2016 winners Highgate, who had been second for the past two years.

This was only after they had been caught and passed by Cambridge & Coleridge's Thomas Bridger before just fighting back, yards from the line in a successful frantic effort to snatch bronze. He may have missed the team medal but, on a day of wind affected times, his 15:08 for the 3.165-mile stage was the day's best and slotted in 11th on the ERRA post 2014 lists.

Over the long 5.34-mile stage, a fair few of the quicker times were on the opener but the fastest went elsewhere and it was Olympic Marathon bound Phil Sesemann, whose 25:27 on stage nine was the best here and 14th best since the lap length was introduced in 2014 and this despite the wind.

65 men's teams toed the start line compared to the nearly 80 who were eligible to apply to compete. Holders, Scottish outfit, Central spent the entire race midfield. The first stage, a long one saw Bedford & County's Jack Goodwin take the early plaudits from Midland champion's Western Tempos Dom James and Alex Laurence of Victoria Park & Tower Hamlets.

Goodwin said: "most of the way I was tucking in and was sheltered by the Victoria Park man."

His club stayed ahead on the short second leg through Ben Davies' 15:27, but they were soon to fall back. Behind, Mark Bostock gained six places for Leeds with 15:18 but there were faster times elsewhere.

Aldershot were fielding a weaker than normal team but their Liam Stone gained 11 places to fourth with a quickest stage time of 15:09.

The long stage three allowed Jacob Allen to gain four places for Highgate and open out nearly a minute over Leeds' Linton Taylor with the fastest stage time of 25:45 and that stayed as the second quickest of the day. He said: "conditions were tough, but if you use the wind on the way out you are fine."

2022 winners Tonbridge had had a steady start but their James West gained 15 slots, to ninth, on this third leg, with an equal fourth best split of 25:56 to move them back into contention.

Positions at the front remained the same on the short fourth stage but Graham Rush took the eventual winners Leeds ahead on the long fifth, a position they were then to hold to the line, more than two hours later. He said: "I took the lead against the wind on the way back to the Stone but didn't know whether to sit in or take it on." Talking about the experience in their Leeds squad Rush added: "we put the older lads in the middle.

One of those was 38-year-old John Beattie, who then extended their lead at the half-way point with a second quickest stage time of 15:28, in his 20th 12 stage outing. Quicker though was Cambridge & Coleridge's Alex Melloy with 15:15 as they moved up to seventh.

Richard Allen then took Leeds further away after a 25:56 long seventh stage effort. He said: "that was hard as I'm just off of a training camp in Portugal where I ran the most I have ever done." Highgate's Alex Lepretre kept them in sight as Bristol went third, albeit two minutes down on the lead. It was a quiet eighth leg as positions remained the same before Sesemann's exploits on nine.

Paris bound Sesemann opened the Leeds' advantage out to well over two minutes and said: "I was able to push hard, although I got some strong gusts of winds in places."

Talking about his Olympic Marathon qualification efforts he said: "I ran the six-stage then ran two 2:08 marathons in ten weeks and now here after mileage of 120 a week." He is able to do this now that he has paused his career as a Junior Doctor. Behind, Kurt Taylor edged Bristol closer to Highgate. But they dropped back slightly on the short tenth where Hercules Wimbledon, who had been in the top six since stage four inched back up to fourth on a lap of modest times.

Oliver Lockley kept Leeds ahead on the penultimate stage but Bristol & West's Jack Millar went past Highgate to second.

Millar, who ran the quickest short stage here two weeks earlier in the Midland race said: "after that I went on two weeks holiday and only got back to Heathrow at 6am this morning." His club must have been grateful as it was his efforts which secured silver medals for Bristol.

This was on a lap where Tonbridge's James Kingston the 2023 English National champion was quickest with the day's third best long stage of 25:49 but they were

not in contention for a medal, despite having three of the ten fastest long stage times.

Matthews Grieve then completed the job for Leeds but was full of praise for his team mates; “the boys did all of the work,” he said. However, those ‘boys’ had revealed earlier that Grieve had got married the previous weekend and, if Leeds won, then today would prove to be a better day for him than his wedding day. They all promised not to tell his wife!

Grieve and Ben Robinson, for Bristol, ran identical 15:30 splits to take the top two medals but, behind there was that do or die effort from Cambridge & Coleridge’s Tom Bridger, the BUCS indoor 3000-metres silver medalist. However, his 15:04 day’s best short stage time just fell short as Highgate’s Charles Cooper rallied at the death.

Women

Thames Valley began as they eventually finished with a first stage win and it was their Yvie Lock who led home the overall top five long stage runners with a 29:36 clocking but, because of the adverse wind, her time found no place in the top 15 women’s times on this 5.38-mile stage.

With just two long legs, on first and fourth, it was to be expected that the opening stint would produce most of the quickest times and so it proved and it was a close race between Lock, Midland quickest Bryony Gunn and Sale Harriers’ Sophie Wood.

These three soon broke clear of the rest before the ‘Valley girl went to the front just after the turn at the far end of the dog-leg at Streetley Gate. There was, however, not much shelter from the wind behind the diminutive Lock, as Gunn and Wood stayed in contact but had no answer up the final hill to the change-over. Lock said: “we were together the whole way but then took it on against the wind just after the turn.” Talking of her running she continued: I have only been running for a year as I was an England hockey player.

This was Lock’s first race of the year but she did run 29:43, for sixth, on the first lap in last year’s race held in easier conditions.

Kate Olding extended the Thames Valley advantage to nearly a minute on the short stage two with a 17:20 split as Highgate advanced to second thanks to Hannah Viner. She said that she “would have liked somebody to run with.”

Hannah Blake then extended the lead by a further 13 seconds but the eventual winners lost ground on the long fourth stage, where Emily Carroll said: “I would have liked to have gone quicker,” but this time it was over Sonia Samuels’ Sale who moved up to second thanks to a sixth best time of 30:20. Samuels said to her rival: “I could see you were a bit closer.”

Sale then continued to close the gap on the penultimate stage, another short leg, through Alice Wright, but they were running out of time.

So, after five stages, Thames Valley continued to lead as Kosanna Weir said: “I have not raced since October so decided to start conservatively” and their lead was just 20 seconds going into the final stage.

Then it was all over as Charlotte Buckley held on as Sale literally ran out of steam. Their Lucy Armitage put in a do-or-die effort up the long hill to the top of the course and closed up a lot of ground on the leaders but, sadly for Sale, it was to no avail as she all but collapsed and she was passed by Leeds’ Sarah Potter, whose 17:27 was third best overall.

Buckley admitted that she “was 100 per cent running out of fear, but I think she overcooked it after she chased me hard up the hill” and so it proved.

Armitage ended up in the First Aid tent with an elevated heart rate but eventually recovered as her team held on to bronze.

Just 37 women’s teams from a lower-than-normal starting line-up of 45 finished and three of those were from Belgrave Harriers and they placed them all in the top 21. Their A team never really featured as, after a steady start they advanced to fourth after Irish woman Nadine Donegan’s second long leg then ended up well over two minutes outside the medals.

Aldershot’s women won this championship seven times in eight years up to and including 2016, but have not figured in the top three since then, despite all of their numbers and were the South of England champions this year. Here they finished seventh and had Amy Griffiths fastest over the short stage with 17:08 a time that took them up to fourth at the half-way-point.

YOUNG ATHLETES

These were slightly better supported than in 2023 and preceded the men’s 12 and women’s 6-stage events

The stand out runner was Brentwood Beagles Olivier Forrest, who notched up her 18th race victory of the year, which have included English Schools Inter-Counties victories. She was even out the following day in the Essex Road Relay championships.

Here, in the extremely windy conditions, Forrest won the under-15 girls’ race by 100-metres, in 17:45.

With many asking questions about her seemingly excessive racing, Forrest had an answer. She said: “we use data to do everything.” As for her track plans for the summer, she added: “the target is the European under-18 championships but I must do the standard in an all-female race.”

The best of the rest was in the reasonably well supported under-17 men's race where Tom Webb won by more than 100-metres in 15:30. His 14:53 from Yeovilton last September ranked fifth for 2023.

As his was the first event away on a blustery day he noted that "you are sheltered for a lot of the race and we were together but I then took it before the turn at the Stone."

The under-17 women's race was won by South of England cross-country sixth placer Sarah Barratt. She has a best of 16:56 but here, found 17:41 enough.

Under-15 boys' winner Sam Collins led throughout his race before winning by 150-metres in 16:30. He said: "that was the plan, then relax." He was only one of a few to set a personal best.