

ERRA MEN'S 12 & WOMEN'S 6-STAGE ROAD RELAY, Sutton Park, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, April 12

On a sometimes sunny, but often overcast day, where temperatures reached 21 degrees Centigrade mid-afternoon, Bristol & West took the men's event and Aldershot resumed their domination in the women's after a ten-year break.

Sutton Park's Authorities had decided to allow public access through Streetley Gate at the far end of the long-stage dog leg, meaning that the race would either have to take place in competition with cars or be forced into using just the previous short stage for all legs, 12 for the men and six for the women.

With the race having been long, then short and so on since its start in 1967, old-stagers rued the loss of the long legs in both men's and women's races but others thought that the racing was more competitive and might prefer to remain at Sutton Park in this format.

The alternative is to possibly seek a two-lap long stage, with its attendant difficulties, or decamping to a new venue such as Mallory Park where the British Veterans now hold their relays.

Men

Midland winners and English National cross-country champions Bristol & West made their intentions clear in the early stages and stayed ahead for most of the race before Highgate interrupted their party on leg nine through Peter Chambers.

Then it was a bit of toing and froing between the two, before Will Battershill, stormed to the second quickest time of the day at 14:30.

It was Bristol's first victory since their phenomenal 1980 12-stage course record and marked the retirement of their long-serving team manager Mike Down, but it nearly ended in disaster as Battershill twisted his ankle on some gravel near Keepers' Pool about half-a-mile from the finish. He gamely carried on with adrenalin ensuring that he got up the final hill, round the tight turn and up to the finish tape.

Then it was straight to the first aid tent, an ice pack and elastic bandaging and he was last seen lying down with his left leg elevated to ease the pain.

Battershill said: "I went out hard from the start as I thought I could catch them then my ankle twisted by the lake, but I ran it off after limping," The fastest lap time would surely have been his without the injury.

As it was, that honour went to Pontypridd Roadent's Jake Smith, whose 14:28 on stage seven had advanced his club ten spots to eighth. He said: "I got out very hard and then held it together and I am getting ready for London where I want sub-2;10." Smith has only had a couple of Park Run outings this year but has good history with a 28:01 10,000 at Highgate's meeting in 2022 as well as a 2:12 victory in the Cheshire Marathon of 2021.

Earlier there was the usual dust up on the opening stage, which was reduced to the 3.165-mile lap previously used for just the short stage here.

After Ben Alcock had led early on for Bedford & County, it was Belgrave's Matthew Merrick who narrowly took opening stage honours from Highgate's Seyed Ghafari in 14:46. Merrick said: "I was second, then when we took the corner, I opened my legs and stretched it and he (Highgate) was beathing heavily". It was all close behind the 'winning' 14:46 time.

Bristol & West were back in a close sixth spot thanks to Midland first stage winner Felix McGrath, but they soon moved up and Kurt Taylor chased home Liverpool's Matthew Jackson on

stage two, with both running 14:58 but the star here was Calum Johnson, who gained all of 21 places to fourth for Gateshead with the third quickest time of 14:34.

After Dage Minors gave Bristol the lead on leg three, mediocre times then kept them clear of the field as Highgate closed, then lost ground with each passing lap, before Chambers gave them hope by taking a five second lead on stage nine.

Earlier on stage five Cambridge & Coleridge's Jack Gray closed seven slots to fifth before revealing that their "second leg runner had not been released." This was unfortunate but got little sympathy.

Top M45 Alastair Watson was just a tick slower than Gray with a 15:07 clocking before saying: "I'm happy with that, but the honour of fastest veteran had earlier gone to Kent's John Gilbert, who ran 15:05."

Alexander Lepretre and Jacob Allen, who said: "it's hard work and hot out there," took them 31 seconds clear of Bristol with just one circuit to go and they thought they had done enough to hold on. It was not to be, thanks to Battershill's heroics. Sore ankle and all.

Having a quiet day were 2023 winners, Central AC who had Andrew Butchart fastest long leg runner then. Here, the 2021 Olympian helped his club up six places to eighth, on leg eight, with 14:43 before admitting that he regretted his move to marathon running, where he failed to finish the 2023 New York event. He said that, this summer he is aiming for "sub-13-minutes for 5000-metres and the World championships." His 13:06.21 pb dates from 2019.

Bristol team manager Down had missed their Midland victory on the same course two weeks earlier. He was quite seriously ill then and said: "I was in hospital for three weeks and lost all my teeth." He said that he had finally managed his squad to victory after 21 years of trying. Not that he was the only team manager retiring as Ben Pochee of second placed and 2016 winners Highgate was also on his swansong.

The present short stage has only been used since 2014 and Emile Cairess held the lap record at 14:43 since 2019, before this year's outing, but there was a serious revision to the best times this year. This was possibly because athletes who might have run a long stage, had that been on offer, were prominent on the short one.

The top six here all bettered Cairess' time and nine of the post 2014 course bests were set this year.

Women

Aldershot's women had been a dominant force in their six-stage race since their first victory in 2008, but this was their first since 2016 when they rounded off their seven wins in total with six in a row.

They started off with Phillipa Bowden, whose 16:53 clocking went into fifth place in the post-2014 timings lists. They then lost the lead before regaining control mid-race and then going on to win from City of Leeds by just over a minute.

Bowden said: "I was in front after a mile but was telling myself there was somebody behind," but Edinburgh's Kirsty Walker and Birchfield's Bryony Gunn were over ten seconds down. "I like Road Relays, they are good fun," added Bowden.

It was Jade Morgan who led for Liverpool at the end of stage two after gaining nine positions but chasing her hard throughout, were 2019 second placers Herne Hill, who went to second. This was through the efforts of Lucy Jones, whose fastest women's lap of 16:48 saw her club gain 12 places to second. Her time went fourth on the post 2014 lists, when this exact lap was first used, behind Kate Maltby's 16:41.

Jones said: "I am just down from Fort Romeau and going for London. I felt smooth and pretty even, although it was warm."

Herne Hill stayed second at the mid-way point but conceded to Harriett Preedy's 17:42 for Aldershot as the eventual winners were three seconds ahead. "I started 35 seconds down and she got round the last corner first but I'm very pleased," said the fast-improving Preedy.

Twins Millie and then Maddie Jordan-Lee pushed the Aldershot lead out to nearly a minute, before Niamh Brown finished things off and a 69 second victory was theirs.

Brown who has been a regular in Aldershot teams in recent years said: "It's my first race back after seven months out with a long-term illness before I started back in February. The training is going well but I could not have done it without these guys."

City of Leeds had moved up to second through Dominique Corradi on stage four, then Georgia Malir improved their position on the penultimate leg before Jenny Walsh had enough in hand to see off the faster Sophie Tooley of Herne Hill.

Behind the top three, Belgrave, whose team manager Charlie Dickinson had collapsed during the race but a team mate took him to St George's Hospital in Tooting. He is compos mentis and said the day after the race: "I have been under the cardiology dept for a few years with first degree heart block and, after several tests they kept me in last night for more tests.

"The outcome is more deterioration in the heart and they are going to fit a pacemaker next week, so hopefully I will be back to normal soon."

ERRA MEN'S YOUNG ATHLETES' 5km CHAMPIONSHIP, Sutton Park, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, April 12

Billy Eccles got the event underway by just getting the better of Mansfield's Jacob Nugent in the under-17 men's event, winning by just a few seconds in 15:27 a big improvement on his 16:12 last year.

He said of his rival: "he got ahead by 25 to 30-metres as I faded but I got up and took it with 400 to go and got around the last corner first."

The under-17 women followed them around the 5km lap and Lincoln Wellington's Isla Porter had a comfortable victory over Jasmine Wright in 17:41. She said: "we won the relay last year. With plans to race 1500 and 3000-metres on the track Porter says her "dream is an England vest."

It was also close in the under-15 boys' event where Tom Thake just got the better of Goerge Watkins in 16:03. He said: "after two-and-a-half-km we were clear of the rest and we were making the pace. I then tried to make it harder up the hill and was first around the last corner."

Gabrielle Pinder took the lead of the under-15 girls' race after one km and went on to win in 17:25.

Uptake was still not commensurate with the naming of this as a National title and the ERRA will consider the future of the young athletes' races.