

NATIONAL 12 & WOMEN'S 6-STAGE ROAD RELAY, & YA 5km, Sutton Park, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands, April 15 2023

Martin Duff reports on the race and continues his long association with the event that began with the second running of the race in 1968.

In perfect running conditions, the 55th staging of the men's event saw the 12-stage title go north of the border, to Scotland's Central AC, as second placed Highgate Harriers took the English championship.

With UKA granting the event, for both men and women, championship status, their medals went to the first three teams home. For the men that was Central, Highgate and Kent AC. The organisers of the event, the ERRA, saw their English medals go to Highgate, Kent and fifth overall club Tonbridge. This left Swansea without medals but content to have competed against the best.

Both UKA and ERRA women's six-stage medals went to the first three clubs to finish, namely Leeds, Thames Valley and Salford. One or two of the Celtic clubs noted that the event is not marketed as well as it could be and not classed as a truly UK championships. The old London to Brighton cup presented by the News of the World, perhaps ought to have been presented to Central AC.

Entry to the men's event is by qualification by the top 25 teams in the three English areas, plus invites to the Celtic nations for three slots each.

No such qualification existed for the women's race.

The ideal running conditions and the advent of the new springy go-faster racing shoes combined to make serious inroads into the best times lists, especially for the men.

Women

With a very consistent and evenly matched team, City of Leeds women won their fourth six-stage event in the past five battles for the championship. However, the organisers were left scratching their heads over the poor entry by women's clubs, where there were fewer takers for this national event than in any of the three area races, including the Midland, here in Sutton Park.

It disappointed the organisers that only 28 squads fielded a full complement, as just 35 sextets started.

It was Leeds four short leg runners who secured victory, as second placed Thames Valley and fourth placed Hallamshire both had their two long stage runners quicker than those of Leeds. Their four short leg runners were all in the top 11 quickest and that sealed matters and led to a near two-minute victory.

The fastest long leg lap among the women went to the in-form Georgie Grgec who dominated the initial 5.38-mile opening stage, despite Lily Partridge keeping her in sight over the second half of

run and the margin at the hand over was just ten seconds. Grgec ran 28:34 and they went fifth and sixth on the list of best times since this lap came in to use in 2014.

Former Kiwi Grgec said: “There were three of us (Lauren McNeil was the third) and it was nice having a race.” She added: “I am a Brit now.”

Behind, McNeil was also under 29-minutes for Hallamshire, as eventual winners Leeds were a minute and a-half down through Camilla McKnespley.

Sophie Coldwell had given 2007 and 2009 winners Charnwood a good start in sixth to send Gemma Steel off on the short second stage. The 37-year-old put in another top-quality performance and ran 36 seconds faster than her fastest short lap from the 2022 race. Her 16:41 split slotted in just behind Kate Malby’s post 2014 best time of 16:38 from 2017.

Steel said: “I went out quite steady but I like to test my speed (over these shorter distances), so I am pleased with that time.”

Behind, Eleanor Curren moved Leeds up to fourth, before Alice Leake took the eventual winners to the front for the first-time at the end of leg three, with a fastest stage time of 17:59. She said: “that’s the fastest I’ve run here.”

Leeds remained ahead on the fourth and second-long-leg, through Heather Townsend but there were quicker times behind. Hallamshire’s Lauren Heyes matched her team mate’s time of 28:59 as Tracy Barlow moved Thames Valley into the podium places for the first time.

The Valley moved closer, to second, on the penultimate lap but Stephie Pennycook was sealing matters for Leeds who were now well over a minute clear.

Belgrave produced a new name on this fifth leg and it was Kate Axford, who ran a 16:44 split a time that ran out the second quickest short leg. Her team manager Charlie Dickinson explained how she came to run for them: “I was in Battersea Park three weeks ago to watch a few of my lot do one of those 'Micky Mouse' Runthrough races. She came third in the 5km race in 16:39. I had no idea who she was and I didn't talk to her.

“The next day, she emailed me out of the blue saying she wanted to join my Belgrave training group at Battersea and would there be room? She also said that she had run as a teenager but had then concentrated on hockey and had got to international standard,

“She decided to give hockey up because of persistent injuries and return to running which she was doing on her own.”

Axford had run for Bedford & County as a teenager but the now 24-year-old had let that membership lapse and, after impressing in training Dickinson added: “I was able to enter her for Sutton Park thinking she might get round in the 17's. for the short stage. When I saw her time, on my watch I couldn't believe it.” That 16:44 remained as the second-best for the short leg for the rest of the race.

Salford came through to snatch third behind Kate Olding’s Thames Valley as winners Leeds again relied on Jenny Walsh to see them home, this time with a 17:31 split, one second quicker than her anchor leg time during her club’s winning 2019 effort.

Northern winners Blackburn did not make the start line and, of the 35 teams on the first leg six were B squads.

Men

Those go-faster shoes were out in force in the men's race and previous fastest long leg runners Andy Butchart, Alex Yee and Dewi Griffiths were all back for another shot.

In the event Griffiths was a little down but just a tick separated the two Olympians as Butchart matched Yee's course best of 24:57.

The lead changed repeatedly and any one of three or four clubs might have won, before Butchart's effort more or less sealed things for Scots raiders Central AC.

The ideal running conditions saw Marc Scott blast off from the start of the race on the 5.38-mile-long opening leg and, with Midland cross-country winner Jack Gray in close pursuit, eventually came home in 25:21 for Richmond & Zetland. Behind, a fast-finishing Josh Grace for Southern winners Aldershot almost caught Gray by the change-over.

Scott said: "I was injured with a stress fracture in December and I have not run since the Liverpool cross-country, but the pace was not that quick and I was sitting in when Jack Gray was leading."

Central showed their intentions early as Ben McMillan was a close fourth.

The short second stage saw Aldershot hit the front as Ricky Harvie's 15:11 for the 3.165-mile short leg was good enough for fourth best overall but, further back, Bedford's Noah Champion was gaining 17 slots with a 15:09.

Aldershot continued in front on the long third leg through Tom Renshaw but holders Tonbridge advanced to second thanks to Ben Cole's 26:19. Cambridge & Coleridge stayed in third but Central, were down and then up back to fourth with Tom Graham-Marr's 26:00. The stage quickest though was deep in the field as Leeds gained 14 slots through Graham Rush's 25:52.

Then Tonbridge edged Aldershot out of the front spot as Central slipped again

Stage five has traditionally been the time for the big guns to start coming out and Highgate became the fourth different race leader thanks to Jacob Allen's 25:56. He said: "I was happy to make sure that Highgate led by a bit of a gap and it's such a lovely course."

Swansea moved up eight places to second through Kristian Jones' 25:14, a time that was to then stay as third best of the day. He said: "I got back a few and I was working hard as you need to go past people."

Kent also moved up, to third and Bedford & County came into contention thanks to Ben Alcock's 25:51.

The half-way point was reached with Highgate still ahead of Swansea and Bedford but short stage times were getting slower. Kent, Central and Hercules Wimbledon now completed the top six.

Then it was the turn of double Olympic Triathlon medallist Alex Yee, to blast out Kent's AC's response. The now 25-year-old was fastest here in 2018 and 2019 and took Kent 34 seconds clear with a time that was just one second slower than his course record of 24:57, as Highgate and Central followed.

Yee said: "I felt good until about 5km then I got stitch," and was clearly disappointed that he failed to bat his own best time here. He now returns to the Triathlon world series but with his sights firmly on Olympic gold in Paris next year. Robert Sesemann, the elder brother of Leeds Phil Sesemann, held the front spot for Kent, despite saying that he was "a bit nervous."

Kent's stayed ahead with Paul Pollock on stage nine but was a little slower than expected, but it was here that Andy Butchart brought Central right into contention and within striking distance of the lead. His 24:57 equalled Yee's course best, nine years after his fastest overall effort in 2014. Kent stayed ahead on the tenth, as Ross Braden's 15:10 held off Central's 15:07 from Hamish Hickey and these two then wound up third and then fastest overall for the short leg.

Kent turned to long-time stalwarts John Gilbert (42), a former South of the Thames winner and Chris Greenwood (49) to see them home but although they both performed well, their older legs were not quite up to it, as Jamie Crowe swept into the lead for Central with a more than useful 25:28 for the 11th leg before they lost out on second as well, on the final stint.

Alex Lepretre's 25:21 had taken Highgate to within touching distance of the previous race leaders, but fourth placed Swansea were now nearly two minutes down.

Finally, Alastair Marshal saw Central home as Highgate's Robal Bahelbi swept past Greenwood's Kent to take second overall but win the English gold, medals. It was the north London club's fourth second spot overall in the last five outings of the event. Swansea's fourth spot was to no avail but fifth placed Tonbridge took the third English medals.

Men (6x5.38M & 6x3.165M alternately):

1 Central 4:09:54 (B MacMillan (4) 25:39, D Colley (14) 16:53, T Graham0Marr (4) 26:00, M Sutherland (8) 16:21, C Milne (8) 26:41, A Hay (5) 15:23, L Fanottoli (3) 26:24, C Phillip (3) 15:34, A Butchart (2) 24:57, H Hickey (2) 15:07, J Crowe (1) 25:28, A Marshall (1) 15:27);

2 Highgate 4:10:38 (S Ghafari (13) 26:18, D Lewis (6) 15:35, P Chambers (6) 26:41, F Grierson (4) 15:32, J Allen (1) 25:56, A Crossland (1) 15:39, R Poolman (2) 26:23, C Haywood (2) 15:31, A Bampton (3) 26:33, R Wilson (3) 15:34, A Lepretre (3) 25:21, R Bahelbi (2) 15:35);

3 Kent 4:10:50 (C Dockerill (15) 26:32, N Armitage-Hookes (10) 15:35, O Hind (7) 26:32, J Simmonds (5) 15:33, M Nicholls (3) 26:18, S Fitzpatrick (4) 16:02, A Yee (1) 24:58, R Sesemann (1) 15:41, P Pollock (1) 26:17, R Braden (1) 15:10, J Gilbert (2) 26:24, C Greenwood (3));

4 Swansea 4:13:33 (D Jones (8) 26:06, J Hopkins (4) 15:36, B McWhirter (11) 27:35, L Cortellese (10) 15:57, K Jones (2) 25:14, F Hines (2) 15:49, W Munday (5) 27:24, B Mitchell (5) 16:05, D Griffiths (4) 25:29, P Tobin (4) 15:56, J Butler (4) 26:48, J Hopkins (4) 15:34);

5 Tonbridge 4:14:17 (A Howard (10) 26:10, S Brown (5) 15:38, B Cole (2) 26:19, J MacDonald (1) 15:37, C De'Ath (7) 27:49, S Strange (7) 15:55, N Marsh (9) 27:25, C Chambers (9) 16:09, J Kingston (5) 25:26, M Ellis (5) 15:37, K Reilly (5) 26:19, B Murphy (5) 15:53);

Fastest (5.38M): A Butchart (Cent) 24:57; A Yee (Kent) 24:58; K Jones (Swan) 25:14; A Lepretre (High)/M Scott (R&Z) 25:21; R Allen (Leeds) 25:22

Fastest (3.165M): H Hickey (Cent) 15:07; N Champion (Bed C) 15:09; R Braden (Kent) 15:10; R Harvie (AFD) 15:11; C Bell (Hallam)/A Peacock (BRAT) 15:20

Women (5.38M, 2x3.165M, 5.38M, 2x3.165M):

1 Leeds 2:10:49 (C McKnespiey (7) 30:06, E Curran (4) 17:34, A Leake (1) 17:59, H Townsend (1) 30:04, S Pennycook (1) 17:35, J Walsh (1) 17:31);

2 Thames Valley 2:12:37 (Y Lock (6) 29:43, A Mundell (5) 18:12, L Dasilva (4) 19:00, T Barlow (3) 29:50, E Carroll (2) 18:22, K Olding (2) 17:30);

3 Salford 2:13:37 (E Bolton (4) 29:23, H Smith (2) 18:02, N Mason (3) 19:20, A Bracegirdle (4) 30:06, L Lombard (4) 19:12, S Bent (3) 17:34);

4 Hallamshire 2:14:39 (L McNeil (3) 28:59, A Gamble (8) 20:04, K Palfreeman (5) 18:04, L Heyes (2) 28:59, J Evans (3) 19:29, C Allen (4) 19:04);

5 Aldershot F&D 2:15:09 (N Brown (10) 30:31, K Hughes (7) 18:22, N McLoughlin (6) 18:50, K Estlea (5) 29:58, L Gent (5) 18:37, H Angell (5) 18:51)

Fastest (5.38M): G Grgec (Herne H) 28:34; L Partridge (Bir) 28:44; H Hayes (Hallam)/L McNeil (Hallam) 28:59; E Bolton (Salf) 29:23; S Coldwell (Charn) 29:24

Fastest (3.165M): G Steel (Charn) 16:41; K Axford (Belg) 16:44; S Monk (G&G)/K Olding (TVH) 17:30; J Walsh (Leeds) 17:31; S Bent (Salf)/E Curran (Leeds) 17:34

(nn) is team position after the appropriate stage

ERRA YOUNG ATHLETES 5km CHAMPIONSHIP, Sutton Park, April 15

Organisers were left very disappointed by the number of takers for the under-17 and under-15 events, despite there being a few individual good performances, as generally, officials outnumbered runners in the events and turnout was less than the low numbers seen in the three area events.

The best performances came from the winners of the two under-15 races. It was Holly Cross for the girls and Jacob Nugent for the boys. Cross, who ran 17:33, said: "It was hard on the hills but I managed to push it.

Nugent was tenth in this year's English Schools cross-country but ran 16:05 here. Under-17 men's winner Owen Wallek was second in the 2022 South of England under-15 cross-country championships and he ran 16:00 here.

Full results on the Sportsoft website