

Web site report for ERRA on the Autumn Relays

By Martin Duff, whose association with the men's event goes back 50 years to 1971, when the six stage was held at Southport and he was tenth fastest in a Reading team that placed sixth

The event returned, in 2021, after a Pandemic enforced break of a year and saw Aldershot complete a senior men's and women's double while the young athletes' races saw six different clubs taking the honours.

There was quite a revision to the all-time best team and individual times among the men but none of the women's best efforts, over a 30-year period, were challenged. Despite both Cardiff and Swansea winning men's and women's titles in recent years, UKA decided against awarding medals and race slots, to the Celtic nations as they have their own championships but have agreed that the Spring men's 12 and women's six stage events, will be recognized as UKA medalists.

Men

It was the first win for the Aldershot men since 2014 and their team hacked 40 seconds from the 2009 previous best set by Newham & Essex Beagles and the top five teams this year entered the top dozen time lists since this distance was first used at Sutton Park in 2001. Improving shoe technology may have had something to do with the improvement but there has always been quality improvement in running footwear as it went from plimsolls to Tiger Cubs and onto cushioned racers and now high-tech multi-layered jobs.

Word was that it was protection against injury that can help runners to achieve higher mileage in training and thereafter better performances.

Jack Rowe's solo anchor leg run saw him match Mo Farah's equal third best ever, for the 5847-metre circuit, as four other men also entered the top twenty lists over the past 20 years.

Northern winners Leeds got to within 34 seconds of Aldershot on the penultimate lap but Midland winners Birchfield seemed, to many watchers, to have got their running order wrong, as they left their fastest men too much to do in the second half of the race and wound up an isolated fourth, despite Omar Ahmed's third best of the day 16:47.

The opening skirmishes saw Derby's Hugo Milner also run 16:47 but his Derby squad soon drifted back out of contention. The other major players were not too far down in a tight finish, albeit ten seconds off the lead. Alfie Manthorpe led the bunch in ahead of Linton Taylor for Leeds' B team

Times were slower on the second leg but AFDs Ricky Harvie followed Shaftesbury Barnet's Jake Shelley through to the top two spots as steeplechaser Dan Jarvis moved up fully twenty places. to third, for Bedford & County, with the fastest stage time of 16:53. "Me, two Leeds and Aldershot were together, then it was just me and Aldershot from the turn," said Shelley.

The half distance was reached with Ben Bradley taking Aldershot ahead for the first time with the fastest split of 17:14, but only after a stage long battle with Shaftesbury's Dylan Evans.

Then Adam Clarke and Liam Dee battled things out, neck and neck, for Aldershot and Shaftesbury on stage 4 before Clarke increased his club's lead by six more seconds, with a third best stage time of 17:03, after they came around the last corner together.

Leeds had got ahead of their B team on stage two and then Emile Caires Took them into the frame with the fastest fourth stage time of 16:46.

Ellis Cross increased the Aldershot advantage, on the penultimate stage, but Jack Goodwin was fastest here, in taking Bedford up a slot to fourth, with 17:14. Cross said: "I thought I would start sensibly then push on at the top of the hill."

Will Richardson's 17:17 edged Birchfield, forward but they were still back in seventh.

Rowe has been running well with good late summer outings personal bests over 10km (28:07) and half-marathon (62:11) and he completed the job but was as surprised as anybody by his 16:33. Only previous course specialist Chris Davies (16:25 in 2003) and Olympian Andrew Butchart have bettered that time in more than thirty years. Talking of his form, Rowe said: "I'm in a good place."

Richard Allen ensured silver for Northern winners Leeds ahead of Shaftesbury, as Ahmed's 16:47 came too late to help Birchfield to any higher than fourth.

Women

Times were not so spectacular among the women but Aldershot notched up their 12th win in the past 14 races and Louise Small, who has more women's medals here than most, was again in their quartet.

With a balanced team they only took the lead on the final stage thanks to their best runner Lily Coward, but who was only tenth fastest overall. Aldershot also crossed the line second with their B team who followed their A squad through the field after lowly starts but that squad was denied team silver medals as explained by the race rules.

The opening women's 4315-metre stage was steady at the start, especially after the initial loop before they hit the main hill but, in the van were Vale Royal's Tessa McCormick, Reading's Lauren Church and Lincoln's Abbie Donnelly. Tucked in

behind, as they turned the corner, were Midland fastest Bryony Gunn and Tonbridge's Nicole Taylor.

Going up the long hill it was Taylor who went to the front before coming home in 13:56, a time that was to stand up as the best for the rest of the race but only ranks 17th best since the distance was first used at Sutton Park back in 1990.

Taylor, who is a modest trainer with just about 60 miles a week and a couple of sessions, along with some cross-training, said: "I was just being more sensible and I was really happy with that, as it wasn't too fast." She hit the front at the Jamboree Stone before the turn back down the hill.

Donnelly was second fastest overall last time the event was held in 2019 and her second placed first leg run was enough to ensure she was third best in 2021.

Megan Davies took Sale ahead on the second leg, as Lincoln stayed second but the two Aldershot teams were gaining nine and 12 places respectively. Deep in the field, the fastest stage two came from Hannah Irwin of Cambridge & Coleridge who advanced a massive 35 slots to a still lowly 19th, with 14:03, a time that ended up the second best of the afternoon.

Davies said: "I took the lead at the top of the hill but I got stitch coming down."

The penultimate stage saw Lincoln's ahead, as former England U19 footballer Sophie Wallace posted the fastest stage time of 14:49. New to running she said: "I have only been racing for 18 months, after I set myself a target of a sub-40-minute 10km on a treadmill. I did 39:39."

Small, back from an Achilles tendon injury, took the Aldershot A team into the frame ahead of Tonbridge, on leg 3, as their B squad advanced to sixth before Lily Coward completed the job for the many time champions, with the fastest stage time of 14:31. Niamh Brown moved AFD B up to second across the line, but the team silver medals went to Lincoln ahead of first-time gongs for Reading.

Young athletes

With the slightly downhill start there were numerous fallers among the younger runners, who rushed headlong down the starting straight, but most seemed to get up and carry on.

Shaftesbury Barnet's Henry Dover set the benchmark for the U17 race with an opening stage 'win' in 11:42 for the 3.88km lap, a time that was to stand as the best of the day. "Josh Blevins (for Gateshead) went off fast but we pulled him back," said Dover.

Wirral won that U17 men's event from Cambridge & Coleridge, after never being out of the frame throughout, but it was the East Anglian club with George Keen who led after the second stage with a race second best effort of 11:47. "I went from sitting in, then overtook the leader after the hill, as I wanted to take my time, then I knew I was safe in first," said Keen.

TJ Jones moved Wirral up one to second, on this penultimate lap, but well clear of Ben Peck who advanced St Edmunds Pacers up 15 slots to third with 11:50.

Then William Strickley completed the job for Wirral, with the race's second-best time of 11:44. He said: "I took the lead on the dog leg by the Stone."

Vale Royal won the U15 girls when the event was last held and they duly moved up to take the U17 women's title after a steady start. Kettering's Alice Bates and Cambridge's Ellie Loosley contested the first stage and, after rounding the last corner together, it was Bates who prevailed by a second in 13:17, the race fastest. Holly Weedall took Vale Royal into the lead mid race with a 13:22 split for their 3.88km circuit, after gaining six places. "I took the lead at half-way," said Weedall, who was fastest U15 two years ago.

Grace Roberts then completed the job for Vale Royal, with a race third best 13:20. "It's a team effort and I didn't want to get overtaken," said Roberts.

Birchfield had a narrow victory over Surrey based club Holland Sports and Vale Royal, as just five seconds separated the top three in the U15 boys' event.

Gianleo Stubbs 'won' the opening leg for Shaftesbury in a race second best time of 12:11 after, as he said: "I took the lead right from the start." His club then fell away as Oliver Cresswell moved up from fourth to take the lead for the eventual winners on lap two where Jacob Hunt had gained 28 spots for Holland Sports.

Then it was a battle royal between Birchfield's Ash Burgess and Holland's Joseph Hunt, the twin of Jacob, on the final leg. It was Burgess who just prevailed but he said of his rival: "he was leading at the pool." This was just before the final hill and turn to the finish. Their times were 12:27 and 12:28, the third and fourth best of the race. As both were being hunted down by Vale Royal's Robert Price whose 12:07 secured third.

Wreake & Soar Valley led the opening 3.88km leg in the U15 girls race through Shaikira King, who makes a habit of 'winning' opening stages in a race best time. It was the same here too and the first year staged a lap long battle with Stockport's Freya Murdoch before prevailing in 13:06. "I only pulled away from Freya in the last 600," said King.

Rotherham's Caitlin McCloy moved up mid race but National U13 cross-country champion Zoe Gilbody was having none of that on the final leg and regained the advantage, for Wreake, with a second-best equaling time of 13:11.

The first race of the day had been the U13 boys' and Wolverhampton & Bilston took gold, thanks to their mid-race runner Fred Jones who moved up nine places to the lead with a race second best effort of 12:47. Bohdi Finn Shields managed to hold on to the finish as Windsor's Jake Mayburgh had a storming last lap in moving up from 15th spot, to second, with easily the best time of the race at 12:16. The U13 girls' champions Liverpool led throughout from their B team. It was their first leg runners Holly Cross and Erin Fay with times of 14:08 and 14:27 who were

fastest overall. Whilst Cross took team and individual gold, Fay was left with nothing as third across the line Rotherham were awarded silver, as the rule is just one team medal per club. Fourth placed Blackheath & Bromley took the third placed medals.