

## **ENGLISH ROAD RUNNING ASSOCIATION NATIONAL ROAD RELAYS, Sutton Park, West Midlands, October 5**

**Here is Martin Duff's report on the 2024 Autumn Road Relays.**

Unbroken sunshine greeted the start of the meeting with temperatures that climbed to about 17 degrees Celsius and City of Leeds' men and Herne Hill's women came out on top of the senior races.

As the afternoon wore on the wind picked up but there was no rain. One feature pointed out by the announcers was that northern clubs picked up five team titles to the South's three,

Traffic problems on the M40 motorway heading north hampered teams from the south but they dominated the minor place team medals.

A feature of the younger age group races was a considerable tail off in entries compared to the three area championships two weeks earlier.

### **Men**

Leeds started the event as favorites and, after veteran Graham Rush gave them a steady start, Emile Cairesse blasted them to front on stage two and they then held sway for the rest of the race.

The Yorkshire club retained their title and took the trophy for the third time as they also won in the pre-covid year of 2019.

Leeds drafted in their two Olympic marathoners and Cairesse' fastest lap here, of 16:38, slotted in seventh on the all-time list, for the 5847-metre trip. The Paris fourth placer was having his first outing since his 2:07:29 in the French capital and duly advanced from 13th to a 14 second lead over Birchfield who had seen Edward Banks take over from refugee Aron Gebremariam.

The English National junior cross-country champion had 'won' that opening stage with a 16:54 clocking ahead of Highgate's Jacob Allen. Gebremariam said that there was a big group at the front who were led out by Phoenix' Finn McNally. "I then led from 2km to go," said the Birchfield man, who had added: "I am the new Mo Farah." Then, talking to anybody who would listen, asked for help with his asylum application with the Home Office later this month.

That second stage that saw Cairesse dominate, was a veritable who's who, as third home, for Southampton, was Zak Mahamed, in his first outing for three months, whose 16:43 gained 26 spots for his club and second quickest overall.

This saw him finish just ahead of the north east pair of Carl Avery and Inter-counties cross-country champion Calum Johnson who noted that Cairesse and Mahamed tore past him.

Leeds' third leg man Cat Mills increased the advantage to 25 seconds as the chasing clubs changed, with 3:35.80 1500-metre man Thomas Keen and Jeremy Dempsey moving up for Cambridge & Coleridge and Shaftesbury respectively. The latter's Jamie Dee then ate into the Leeds lead on stage four, so that Richard Allen's advantage was just 33 seconds before sending Phil Sesemann off. On that fourth stage, 2023 English National cross-country champion James Kingston was the biggest mover gaining 19 places but his Tonbridge team were still deep down the field in 20th spot. His 16:53 was the fourth best of the day and said: "I started a bit further back than I'd hoped." Sesemann front ran a stage best 16:58 to increase the Leeds margin to almost a minute over Shaftesbury and Cambridge & Coleridge. He said: "the wind picked up and it is hard when you are on your own." Linton Taylor finished the job for the holders despite Liam Dee closing slightly for Shaftesbury, who were third in 2021 and came home second. Thomas Bridger secured southern champions Cambridge's fourth third place medals in the last five championships. However, the fastest laps on the final stage, were further down as Will Barnicoat, who was second quickest in the past two six stage races here and English National cross-country champion Will Battershill, ended up sixth and third fastest overall. The Leeds winning time was the fastest of their three recent wins in the event,

## **Women**

Herne Hill Harriers had never placed in the women's event before and had to thank Georgie Grgec for their victory as the New Zealander was comfortably the quickest overall with a 13:30 clocking for the women's 4315-metre lap. They were however pushed on the final circuit by Vale Royal's Katy Ward's 14:11, that closed the Herne Hill margin to 24 seconds. Along with eventual third placer Thames Valley, they were well down after the opening stage where, in a tight race, Norwich's Megan Gadsby, just squeezed home ahead of Belgrave's Sarah Astin and Birchfield's Briony Gunn. The eventual podium placers were not too far down on time, however, as just a minute covered the first 24 places. This closeness then enabled Megan Marchant who was fastest here in the Midland relay two weeks earlier, to move up 21 places to the lead, with a 14:23 clocking. The Western Tempo runner was chased home by Vale Royal's Holly Weedall, as Belgrave were third. There were more rapid advances behind, as Charnwood's Gemma Steel, Aldershot's Kate Eastlea-Morris and Highgate's Hannah Viner completed the top six at the mid-race point.

Aldershot had finished first and second here last year and been champions 13 times since 2007, but were hindered not only by withdrawals, but also being stuck in standstill traffic on the M40 en-route to the event.

Herne Hill were nearly a minute away from the lead when Grgec took over, but just 13:39 later, were nine seconds ahead of Aldershot's Niamh Brown after not only gaining 10 places but also in a time 41 seconds faster than any other runner. The 30-year-old's time was the second fastest ever among the women, since their race moved to Sutton Park in 1990. Only Paula Radcliffe's 13:26 over a slightly longer 4.35km lap in 1993 has been faster. For the purists, Grgec's 13:30 bettered Amelia Quirk's 13:35 from 2022 on this exact lap.

She said: "it was fun seeing the numbers being passed, but it is all about how you pace it and I was faster than last year."

Then, talking about her ambitions, said that she planned to firstly improve her personal best 72:58 for the half-marathon distance in Valencia in a couple of weeks.

Grgec also noted that she went home to New Zealand in March and is thinking about a slot on the Kiwi's Commonwealth Games team when the event is staged in Glasgow in 2026.

Behind, just 11 seconds separated third placed Kate Olding's Thames Valley from sixth placed Vale Royal.

Then it was down to Lucy Jones, who said she "felt strong", to hold on for Herne Hill, as a fast-finishing Katie Ward brought Vale Royal up four places to the silver medals with that equal second best 14:11. Thames Valley's Kosanna Weir also just edged past Aldershot to take third spot and their first ever medals in the event.

## **Young Athletes**

### **U17 Men**

Salford Harriers won the under-17-men's event and, after Evan Grime's third fastest overall time of 13:30 on the 3.88km opening circuit had seen the reds home second, Jamie Barber and Jack Marwood went ahead to take the title but it was a close race behind.

2022 under-15 champions Sutton & District chased hard on the final circuit through Alex Lennon's 11:29 to close to within seven seconds as Joseph Scanes' Blackheath were just four ticks down in third.

Earlier, that first leg had been 'won' by City of Norwich's Michael Clark and his 11:21 time was the third best ever for the age group, behind Ben Dijkstra's and Mo Farah's 11:19 from 2014 and 1999 respectively.

Clark has had a good few weeks: firstly, a win came in the delayed English National cross-country championships, followed by a third quickest run-out in the southern relays before this top spot

### **U15 Boys**

Cambridge & Coleridge were adjudged to be the under-15 boys' champions despite finishing second at the line some 26 seconds behind Dacorum.

The Hertfordshire trio were disqualified by the referee, as all three of their runners were deemed to have been paced, believed to have been by a rather naïve coach on a bicycle.

Their Teddy Murphy had 'won' the opening leg with a 12:06 clocking before Toby Pritchard and Oliver McDonald brought them home ahead.

However, the title went to Cambridge whose Finn McClennan, the English Schools 1500-metres second placer, came home second on the opener in 12:13 and was later awarded the fastest lap medal ahead of Southport Waterloo's William Delamere's first lap effort of 12:18.

### **U13 boys**

The youngest boys' age group title went to Windsor, Slough Eton & Hounslow and their trio have to thank their anchor leg runner Ted Bainbridge for their gold medals.

It had all been very close over the first two stages where Wolverhampton's Rocco Hawley had narrowly 'won' the first 3.88km stage in a race best 13:12 before Thomas Hennigan saw Southern champions Hercules Wimbledon just edge the lead from Liverpool and Windsor at the end of leg two.

Then Bainbridge matched that 13:12 clocking for Windsor to avenge their southern defeat and match the equal best time for the age group.

### **U17 women**

Lincoln Wellington's girls have been having a good year and here they took the under-17 women's title by nearly a minute from Aldershot.

Isla Porter, the English Schools 1500-metre fourth placer, gave them a good start by placing second on the first 3.88km stage with 13:19. This was behind Windsor's fast improving Marnie Fieldsend's, 13:18 and these two were the fifth and sixth quickest of the age group.

Mollie Grant then took Lincoln ahead mid-race with a 13:49 stage best that was nearly matched by Molly Carvel who moved Liverpool up seven places to second but the Mersey-siders were 32 seconds adrift of the lead and then dropped away. Finally, it was the in-form Ellarose Whitworth, who was second in the delayed English National under-15 championship three weeks earlier, who gave Lincoln Wellington a comfortable winning lead, with the third best time of 13:12. They had won the under-15 girls' event last year.

However, there were faster times behind as Katie Pye, the English Schools cross-country bronze medalist, whose 13:07 saw Aldershot take silver medals and Ava James, the Inter-Counties third placer's 13:04, gold for Lewes, as both clubs moved up to the podium places.

### **U15 girls**

Aldershot came out on top here but it was a close-run thing as Windsor had looked to be on for a second young athletes' victory for most of the race.

It had been Windsor's Kara Gorman, who had won the postponed English National under-13 championships three weeks earlier. who had led on the opening stage.

This was with a 13;10 clocking to just nip the 'race' ahead of Chelmsford's Ezra Harrold and they kept the lead through Tara Ferguson on leg two. However, Aldershot's Poppy Guest was closing with the third best time of 13:14.

The final stage saw their advantage then ebb away as, firstly Aldershot's Kitty Scott and then Chelmsford's Jorja March went through for the top two medals.

Aldershot's winning time was a course record for the age group.

### **U13 girls**

The new Merseyside Warriors Pentathlon and Athletic Club took their first National title, after placing second here last year, when twins Isobel and Evie Beddow were joined by Daisy McVicar to win from Lincoln Wellington by 44 seconds.

However, it had been Rugby & Northampton's Bella Lamb who had taken the opening lap from St Edmunds Pacers' Sophie Bolton with Isobel Beddow third. Then McVicar saw Warriors ahead of Holly Norris' Lincoln, who had moved up seven places with a third best 14:01.

Then Evie Beddow brought her club home for a solid victory. The twins explained that they both competed in pentathlons whilst McVicar did triathlons.

Further back Madison Kindler, the under-13 indoor 1500m UK record holder, advanced 14 places, to fifth for another newish club, Brentwood Beagles, with the age group best time of 13:14.

Kindler's time was comfortably the best on record for the under-13s as it beat Naomi Speake's 13:36 for Bristol & West back in 2006. Shrewsbury's Roni Kohring, 14:00 was second fastest on the day.