

ENGLISH ROAD RUNNING ASSOCIATION NATIONAL ROAD RELAYS, Sutton Park, West Midlands, October 4

It was all change in the senior races as there were first time winners in both men's and women's events whilst, in the younger age groups, Brentwood Beagles took both the under-15 and under-13 girls' titles, with the rest being shared.

For the men it was Cambridge & Coleridge who finally made the top of the podium after three successive bronze medals whilst a young Vale Royal quartet took the women's gold medals after a silver last year.

Storm Amy passed overnight but its strong winds still buffeted the runners throughout the day although the threatened rain was mainly a passing shower. Whilst the young athletes ran over their now traditional lap of 3.88km the seniors were forced to race over a shortened leg, thanks to the Park Authorities installing a gate on the dog leg past the Jamboree Stone.

In an attempt to compensate, some distance was added to the seniors' opening loop but the total distance was reduced from 5.847km to 5.47km, but with the women running the same distance as the men for the first time,

Men

The senior races were the last away with the men starting ten minutes ahead of the women and 76 men's outfits toed the start line but none of the eventual medalists showed in the top few.

First home was Keighley and Craven, as Joe Hudson repeated the medicine dished out in the Northern two weeks earlier. His time of 15:46 would stand as fourth best as City of York's Angus McMillan and Midland first stage winner, Bristol's Flynn Jennings chased him home.

Hudson said: "I ran with them then went ahead at the top of the hill. I come from a mountain background," he explained. However, his final sprint was needed to see off McMillan.

Keighley stayed ahead for much of the trip down the loop before Joshua Hobbs briefly took Brighton & Hove into the lead after taking over from Ian Crowe-Wright and held second at the change-over.

Going into the lead on that stage two was Bristol's Jack Millar, as Ted Higgins and Thomas Keen moved up for Tonbridge and eventual winners C&C.

Mid race and Cambridge had moved ahead, thanks to Dominic Jones, who said: "I took the lead down by the gate." This was at the end of the (this year's) shortened dog-lag. Then Jonathan Escalante-Phillips' third best 15:45 compounded their lead, before saying: "I think we have a good chance (of winning).

This was over a closing James Kingston, for Tonbridge, whose 15:34 was second best of the afternoon. The quickest was further back, as Jacob Cann gained ten slots to third, for Western Tempo, after a 15:30 split.

Solid times from James Teagle and Callum Elson added significantly to the winning lead of Cambridge & Coleridge, but Tonbridge, even with 40-year-old Ben Cole on leg five just held off a fast-finishing Highgate for third.

This first win for Cambridge & Coleridge was welcomed by team manager Mark Vile, who was an international runner for Westbury in his younger days, who said: “we have been building for this for 16 years.”

Women

Vale Royal advanced from second last year to take the senior women’s title after taking the lead through Grace Roberts on stage two after Sarah Dufor-Jackson had given the Winsford based outfit a solid second spot on the opening leg.

This was behind Lincoln Wellington’s Abbie Donnelly, who ran 17:42 for the same 5.47km lap as the senior men. She said: “I took the lead at the start of the hill but the wind was coming in every direction.” Donnelly then explained that “this was a sharpener before doing the Frankfurt Marathon in three-weeks-time.” There she said that she hopes to set a new best inside 2:25.

Grace Roberts then took the lead for Vale Royal by the mid-race point, saying: “I took the lead after the out and back. The wind was strong but I didn’t notice it on the way back.”

Behind, many-time winners Aldershot had moved up to second thanks to Kate Estlea-Morris’ 18:29, but Darcy Murphy kept the eventual winners ahead on the penultimate stage.

It was there that Bristol & West finally got into the act after a slowish start, as they had Charlotte Taylor run the fourth fastest split of 18:10 before Chelsea Baker finished things off for them with an 18:22 split for second overall.

However, the title belonged to Vale Royal, as long-time servant, despite being still only 20-years-old, Holly Weedall ran the same 18:22 time to give the north a longed-for victory as southern clubs had seemed dominant in the earlier races.

Weedall has been racing and winning at Sutton Park since 2017 when her fastest lap gave Vale Royal the under-13 title. They followed with a similar dose of medicine in the under-15 2018 race and retained their title in 2019 before winning the 2021 under-17 title.

Now, Weedall anchored her club as they graduated to the senior women’s title with her sixth fastest time. She said: “this is the first time than any one of us has won a senior medal.” This despite their multiple successes as younger athletes.

Aldershot’s women have a long and proud record in his age group and took another medal, with third after missing out completely last year.

Elsewhere, Lydia Turner was third quickest as her club, Birtley finished down in 26th spot despite her 18:02 gaining 21 spots to sixth mid-race.

Despite large entries in the three area championships and with no restriction on numbers of women's teams allowed to race, just 65 teams started.

Young Athletes

Just as in the senior races there were first time winners in both men's and women's under-17 events as well as Brentwood Beagles double victories in the two youngest girls' age groups. Elsewhere there was also a first time win for Bracknell in the under-15 boys' race.

It was St Mary's Richmond who came from behind to take the under-17 men's race, as Marcus Solomon and Daniel Jeffs preceded Tom Mythen's second best of the race 11:29 split on the glory leg.

Mythen said: "I caught them, then was first for most of the race but I then heard them shouting out the names behind and had to sprint hard at the end."

Earlier, it had been Mikey Bacon who had led the opener for Rotherham with a third best 11:30. He said "I led from 500 metres, then they overtook but I took it again with 1km to go." Exeter Harriers followed St Mary's through the field, thanks to Jasper Forty and Oscar Purchase, before Rory Barclay-Watt could not quite snatch gold up the final hill, despite a race quickest 11:23.

For the under-17 women Chelmsford upstaged Lincoln Wellington by leading throughout after Ezrah Harrold had given them a winning start on stage one ahead of Windsor's Tara Ferguson. Their times being the first and third best times of the race. Harrold said: "There were three of us in the group but I only took the lead in the last 300 metres."

Isla Porter closed right up for Lincoln mid race and her club all but took the lead on the final stage through Ellarose Whitworth but it was not their day as Jorjia Marsh finished the stronger for Chelmsford and victory was theirs.

Behind, Kitty Scott ensured an under-17 women's bronze for Aldershot with an equal fastest 13:16.

Bracknell were also first-time winners after Elliott Langley-Abar gave them an opening leg lead that they held to the line. His 12:04 was the age groups' fastest. Brentwood Beagles have been a threatening presence in the two youngest age groups in the last couple of years and today was their day. Firstly, they totally dominated the under-13 race from start to finish, to hack a full minute from the age group race record with their Madison Kindler fastest overall for the second year in a row.

Then they just took the under-15 girls' event after their Heidi Woodley had given them a solid second placed start, before Sophie Bickerstaff and then Summer Smith's second quickest 13:16 sealed it.

Warriors Pentathlon chased them hard thanks to the Beddow twins Eve and Isobel, who narrowly took them ahead mid-race before Isla Yorke had to concede to Smith.

Earlier, Derby's Olivia Lee had taken the fastest lap medal by 'winning the opening stage in 13:12. She said: "I took the lead with 1km to go."

Blackheath & Bromley are regular age group winners in these races and, here, the under-13 boys' title was theirs, as Emery Aldridge finally took them ahead on the last stage, with the fastest lap time of 12:56.

The second-best time was set on the opening leg by Windsor's Ben Welch with 13:08.