

## National XC Relays 2021

6<sup>th</sup> November 2021

By Ric Park

I really didn't know where to start with this one. So, I will start with an overall picture, every team/club can say who is missing and who can come into a team, and we are no exception so I will ignore this and just look at yesterday. Let's start with the stats and the women first from Seniors to U13s, 18<sup>th</sup>, (19<sup>th</sup> after 2), 25<sup>th</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> were the team scores which is pretty good. To give you some context to this over 50 teams in each age group with 100 in the seniors and 77 in the U15s.

On the Men's side 144 in the seniors and just over 60 in the Junior age groups, 43<sup>rd</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> would look like a very good day out and they are cracking results, but they were just the B teams.

6<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> the future is bright, and the future is white and blue.

Times tell one story but don't always give the full picture (especially round here where the first leg is 100m ish shorter but starts from the bottom rather than the top of the hill).

Hattie and Frankie kicked us off, Hattie in her second ever XC race and Frankie somewhat a returning veteran these days. Both showing that they can compete at this level, the Junior women has a slightly smaller field but with athletes with plenty of international experience in there. Both will be looking for further opportunities as the winter unfolds and a couple of teammates to complete a team.

The U17s run at the same time, Ellie and Elizabeth led them out. Elizabeth is working hard on a return from Covid and it is very much an up and down pattern but still enjoying her racing. Ellie on her now traditional first leg yet again was in the mix as one of the top women in the country 4<sup>th</sup> on the leg and a time that stacked up well for the rest of the day. The consistency should not be underestimated, recovery has been key to this. It is almost copy and paste for Isabel and Charlotte who have also been ever present this autumn. The girls all support each other in training/racing and also on runs in the week, no more was that true that yesterday as the Seraphina took jumpers for the older girls early on and then the older girls repaid the favour for the U15s later in day. It's the things you don't necessarily see that often make days like yesterday. Charlotte and Ellie also repegged the tent halfway through the day, multi-talented.

The U13 boys were up next and differing strategies took place here, Owen went hard, Raph and Eddie more measured. It almost worked for Owen before fading slightly, I say fading he still came in 15<sup>th</sup> he is on a steep learning curve no easing in to racing, Sutton Park then Mansfield. The gaps are so small that 40 seconds covers all 7 of our athletes. Adam and Edward set about continuing the good starts from the first leg both making progress through the fields. Harrison and Oliver were on the final legs and again had cracking runs to bring the team's home. The boys will continue to gain experience over the coming weeks but I for one am glad I don't have to select a team for the rest of the winter. These boys will be looking to finish highly at the Southern and Nationals going to be a great one to watch.

The U13 girls are similar and in Jasmine they have a cracking lead off leg. Even with the difficult starts she ploughs her way through, 13<sup>th</sup> on the first leg is a great result and backs up her runs in both the relays so far this year. She is quickly becoming one of the strongest girls in the country.

Importantly it is not just Jasmine with Juliette and Caitlin she is backed up and they held the team in 16<sup>th</sup>. Not only do they run fast but they are good friends and enjoy training together.

A top line up for the Junior men and that wasn't just us. We had 8 guys out there with 2 of our first leg runners making the trip down from Edinburgh because this is a race you do not want to miss. The A team were in the mix throughout but never quite in the podium places. Nicolas, David and Hugo led off their teams, Nicolas and David veterans Hugo I think took a few hundred metres to settle in, It is fast and it doesn't slow down. Nicolas put the team inside the top 10 and David and Hugo gave OJ and Callum something to work off. To Callum first, who had a really solid leg which should give him a great deal of confidence after a few weeks of dodgy training (Couldn't think of a better word).

OJ let rip and just had fun taking 17 places on his way through the grin was back at the end as he finished and went straight on to cheer leading duty, the bounce was back. Will was in a situation of wondering whether to stick or twist which can happen in these races, with a pack sat on him in the early stages of the leg they sat on him as he looked to push on before kicking on in the final stages. The race situation dictated the tactics and give a different take on the time. Alex and Tom were on last. Tom is coming back and possibly a week later and he will be back to full strength, Alex did what we come to expect. A cracking last leg he closed in, in the latter stages but didn't quite have enough to haul the team onto the podium.

Revenge was on the cards for the U17s, they thought they should have won at Sutton Park so set out to make sure they took a national title. With Isaac on first leg, they have as near to a guaranteed good start as you can get in the sport (This guy lost his shoe on the start line as an U13 and his team still won). 4<sup>th</sup> on the first leg and in touch job done. Isaac closes in on the leader, take the lead and pull away, sounds simple when you write it down and looked simple watching, but anything but to actually do it. He did it and in spectacular style. So, for George the pressure was on, don't blow the lead. Set off hard but controlled, control the middle section (at this point the gap to second did close slightly) and then have enough left in the tank to pull away at the end. George did it perfectly, he did exactly what he needed to do to bring the team home for a well-deserved national title. Brilliantly done by the boys.

Behind the B team isn't half bad. Alfie set them off in his first outing round to give them a solid start, he was a little disappointed but for him the last 6 months have been a massive learning curve, coming in at this level as an U17 is always going to have its ups and downs. Lewis continued his great run of form taking places throughout and handing over to the returning Gabe. Great to have Gabe back running the relays and out having fun with his teammates. Like the other teams we had a C team with Gethin and Nicolas who can also mix it at this level. That depth will help them later in the winter as they go for more team titles.

The U15 girls are quickly establishing their own group both in training and races and as they grow in confidence their results have improved. Seraphina led them off with a great first leg, like I have said above you just need to give your second leg runner something to work with and in touch. Kiera took 19 places on the second leg enjoying herself as she moved through the field. Emily was hard on herself but having joined the club in the summer her improvement has been massive and continues to improve both in her training and racing. A great team result for the girls.

In the boys we changed things up. Ewan went off first to try and get the boys up there and involved, that he did, despite slightly fading in the final 100m he lost a couple of positions but time wise they were right in the mix. So we go to Liam on the second leg who glided through the field, this was him

on top form as he moved the team up to 1<sup>st</sup>. He even rallied up the final stretch to retake the lead in the closing stages (his mum didn't believe me). So like George earlier, George had all the pressure on the final leg, unlike George earlier this George had company from the start. With some fast guys closing and trying to pull away from those he started with a medal was my know means a guarantee.

He firstly took the lead before quickly being joined by one other and 1 just behind. Up the hill out of the woods George closed back on the leader and was joined by one other leading 3 battling for the title. George put everything in going for the win to come home third and earn the boys a National medal. It was a great last leg earning a medal and putting everything in to go for the win.

Behind Marcus fell off the start but undeterred got up to put the team in touch going forward, a returning Matt then like many others ploughed through the field taking a massive 30 places and Tom continued the momentum taking a further 4 places on the final leg. That wasn't all we had George, Jonty and Leo completing a third team, all 3 are bottom years and a vital part of the team. They are a great team and as you can see there is a lot of them.

In the Senior Women we saw the return of a few old faces in the teams and one newbie. The newbie took the first leg and didn't quite realise how many good athletes turn up for these relays. It has proved a popular tune up for the senior women in prep for the longer races over the next few weeks. Hannah had a great first leg coming in 3<sup>rd</sup> although I think she is still unhappy being pipped on the line. Belinda took over and is always full of energy and great to see her back running well, keeping the team up there, Lucy was looking for some motivation and I think found it running a solid last leg and bringing the team home inside the top 20. I thought Becca would run well on the first leg and I think she enjoyed it having a great first leg, she has been ever present this autumn and had cracking runs each time. It was also great to have Justine back racing for us on a comeback from injuries, she will look to further XC and road races over the winter and we had a special appearance of Becca out running for us again now she is back a little closer to home.

So, to finish off the day we had then men and it wasn't the greatest of starts as Jep took a tumble off the line. He then set off to overtake as many as he could and when you have 100 ahead of you on a tight and twisty course that is no mean feat. He had a cracking leg and brought the team up to 11<sup>th</sup>, a brilliant run after the first 50m, these things can happen off the start. Ollie made a few more places on a solid second leg, Michael then did the same to move the team up again. I was back on the course for Tom who had a lonely last leg before closing in on 6<sup>th</sup> late on to take the place on a sprint finish and by 1 second. What today proved is we have the depth to be competitive whatever A team we put out with the men and that's even with a fall.

In the second team James, Michael, Tim and Andy made the team and the 4 will form an important part of the XC races as we look further into the winter when the Men will look to compete for team titles at both the Southern's and Nationals, where if we are to go for the first 12 in at the Nationals we will need everyone present at Parliament hill. Thank you for all the support, especially those that stayed all day and I appreciated the cheers throughout the course when I ran and I hope everyone else did when they were out there, for me that's what makes the event so great that we can all watch and support each other.

The 2021 relay season is over and 2 National medals to end it. A brilliant set of results. If you haven't already put the 29<sup>th</sup> of January in your diary and the 26<sup>th</sup> Feb at Parliament hill for the Nationals. Don't bother with a half term holiday because the Nationals in Feb is not one to be missed. We will have athletes competing for individual and team honours in all the age groups.