

Antrim Cross Country Challenge 12th January 2013

On a crisp sunny day at Greenmount Antrim, our northern mens and womens team arrived ready and prepared to race and maybe pick off a few international runners!

The senior womens race was first and with the likes of Fionnuala Britton (European cross country champion) Steph Twell (who is coming back to her old self), Louise Damen and a few Kenyans it was set to be an interesting race. Having to complete 3 laps of an undulating course the team was well packed on the first lap on what I would describe as good going underfoot. On lap 2 the race started to take shape with the front runner Fionnuala Britton some 40 metres clear of Louise Damen. Our first northern runner Katie Walshaw in 16th followed by Samantha Johnson in 19th, then came Sophie Cowper 23rd and the youngest member of the team at just 17 Katherine Walker in close order in 27th. On the final lap the northern team rallied well to move up the field, with Katie Walshaw coming home in 14th, beating 1 one of the England selections and considering Katie had not felt well before the race, it is a fantastic performance from her, coming home in 17th was Samantha Johnson, followed by Sophie Cowper in 21st and with fine sprint finish came Katherine Walker who showed she is capable of running with the best moving up the age groups. The eventual winner was Fionnuala Britton followed in by Louise Damen. The Northern team came second in the team event.

In the Mens race it was loaded with some very good athletes including, Thomas Ayeko (Uganda) David Bett (Kenya) Andy Vernon (England), Frank Tickner (England) and one of Irelands favourites Stephen Scullion. With 8 laps to contest the first 2 laps had been run at a very steady pace and not much to pick between the top 20. The 3rd lap really sorted the field out with both Ayeko and Bett forging a commanding lead by running almost 40 seconds faster than the previous 2 laps, following them came Andy Vernon & Frank Tickner, our first northern runner was to pass through in 8th place in Matt Bowser, followed by Carl Smith 18th, Andy Nixon 26th and Charlie Hulson 29th. As the race progressed the Ugandan and Kenyan did not look like being beaten, but the race was well and truly on between the English lads. Matt Bowser had Vernon, Scullion & Tickner in his sights and what a fantastic tussle it was, with Matt working very hard not to let the group get away from him. Meanwhile Carl Smith started to move up the field and looking very strong, Andy Nixon was now working hard to stave off Charlie Hulsons (U20) challenge with them both moving through the field into the top 20 going into the final lap. With the finish insight Matt was working hard to get past Steve Scullion but just ran out of distance to cross the line in 6th position. Afterwards Matt said "I have not had many races but knew I was in good shape after winning the Northern 10k title at the Ribble Valley 10k some 2 weeks before, I just wanted to have a go and try and beat some of the England boys and I did that so I am very pleased and looking forward to the Northern XC Champs in a few weeks time". Carl Smith was our next runner finishing a fantastic 12th place, Andy Nixon and Charlie Hulson had their own private battle coming into the home straight, you could not separate them with 60m to go but Charlie was the one who had the final kick to finish in 17th position with Andy Nixon in 18th to bring the Northern Team home in 1st place beating the England team. The top 3 places had been taken up by Thomas Ayeko 1st, David Bett 2nd and Andy Vernon 3rd.

Don Lennon