

North East Indoor Report

GATESHEAD duo Craig Sturrock and Richard Kilty were judged to be the best performers on view at the North Eastern Counties Indoor Championships while there was a feather in the cap of organising secretarys Janice Kaufman and Kevin Flannery when Gateshead International Stadium incorporated an Open Wheelchair Race into the championships for the very first time.

Sturrock and Kilty each put in winning performances in their chosen event to pick up an award from sponsors Start Fitness while 11 times Paralympian gold medalist Tanni Grey-Thompson had to play second fiddle to husband Ian in the 60 metres wheelchair contest. The field events were held on the first day of the two-day well-organised championships when three new championship records were set but it was the performance of Sturrock in the senior shot put competition which took the eye.

The Tynesider, in his first indoor contest of the season, winged the compressed rubber ball out to 16:29 metres which was not only a new personal best but also puts him in second place in the UK indoor rankings for this winter.

Middlesbrough AC's Ade Babatunde set new figures of 14:35 metres to win the triple jump and lift the gold medal. The Teessider also won the long jump but had to compete as a guest which meant the winning medal went to Michael Briggs of South Shields.

Chester-le-Street's Sophie Hindhaugh, competing in the under-13 girls shot putt event, had a best effort of 8:09 metres which bettered the old figures of 7:74m set in 2003 by Blackhill Bounders; Tyne Breen.

Less than an hour later Jarrow and Hebburn's Alexandra Bainbridge cleared 1:36m in the under-13 girls high jump, which was eight centimetres higher than Shannon Howden (Gateshead) won last year's title.

There was a good contest in the women's shot put championship with victory going to Birtley's Stephanie Hopkinson whose winning effort of 11:60m moves her up to fourth in the UK winter rankings.

On the second day it was the turn of the track athletes to shine and once again there were two new championship best's to celebrate.

And, for the unfortunate Howden, it was another one of her records that was broken by another talented Jarrow and Hebburn athlete.

Competing in the 60m hurdles, Stephanie Addison won the gold medal with a time of 10.62secs which bettered Howden's 2007 figures of 10.78secs.

Addison went on to make it a double when she sped to victory in the 60 metres with a time of 8.73secs though it wasn't to be the fastest by an under-13 as Shildon's Alona Mae Lonsdale, who had won the long jump on the first day, ran 8.54secs in the B final after taking a tumble during the heats of the event.

The final record to fall was in the under-15 boys 60m hurdles which saw Gateshead's Sam Hall run 9.21secs to erase the seven year record of 9.4secs set by Gateshead team-mate Lewis Robson.

Like Addison in the younger age group, Hall went on to a double by winning the 60 metres. Apart from the new records there were numerous other outstanding performances including Gateshead's Jayne Hansom who lifted three gold medals in the under-17 section. The talented multi-eventer won the high jump and long jump on the first day and followed that up 24 hours later by taking the 60m title.

The large contingent of spectators were eagerly waiting for the appearance of Paralympian star Tanni Grey-Thompson and while it was a first for the North East Counties Championships it was also a first for the three New Marske Harriers wheelchair athletes, Tanni, husband Ian and 13-year-old Jade Jones with Dame Tani suggesting before the race

that they could be setting a new British wheelchair record for the distance for as far as she knew there had never been a 60 metre wheelchair race indoors before.

So, with a huge vocal support from the enthusiastic spectators, the three sped down the track for all they were worth and it was Ian who came out of the pack to seal a family victory with Tanni in second place and Jade, third.

After getting her breath back, Tanni was in no doubt that racing 60 metres was as tough as doing the Great North Run.

"None of us had done this before so we didn't really know what to expect," said Tanni.

"After all, we don't have the opportunity to compete alongside able body athletes very often so this was great fun to be part of the North East Championships, though, personally having not trained very hard for the event found it quite difficult.

"It would have been nice if the judges could have disqualified Ian for going out of his lane or something, but we all enjoyed ourselves and maybe if we get the chance we would like to come back next year and maybe break our own British record!

"We would like to thank the North East Counties for giving us this opportunity and maybe next time we will have a few more racers to maybe make it a bit more competitive."

After the wheelchair event it was the turn of the sprinters and it was the final event on the programme which produced fireworks.

Kilty, who was captain of the GB team at the World Junior Championships in the summer, shot out of the blocks in the senior 60 metres and despite having his wrist in plaster after a recent accident, he scorched down the runway to win in 6.84 seconds, a time which not only won him the track performance of the day but places him in third place in the UK rankings on the same time as Chris Tomlinson recorded last week in London.

Kilty's time is a new stadium record but is marginally outside the hand-timed championship record of Jonathan Edwards and Morpeth's Craig Telford of 6.8 seconds.

Kaufman and Flannery, who also pull together the NE Counties Outdoor Championships, were delighted with the way things turned out with Flannery commenting: "We tweaked it a bit after our first effort last year and I think it went down well with athletes and spectators alike.

"Spectators can now get much closer to the action whether they want to watch the long jump, shot putt or sprints so they can encourage their athletes on.

"We had five new championship records and a huge number of winning performances which bettered last year's results so that has to be pleasing

"And, of course, the inclusion of the wheelchair race proved to be one of the highlights of the weekend with Tanni, her husband Ian, and Jade Jones receiving a huge round of support which nearly lifted the roof of the hall off.

"I think everyone involved with the championships were rewarded by seeing some excellent performances.

"The only down side of the championships was the lack of entries, especially in the senior age group, which is disappointing.

"However, we are going to be looking into how we can rectify that for next year and we already have a number of ideas on how to improve the championships even further.

"The championships would not have been a success without the input of many people. I'd like to thank the officials, volunteers, especially the ladies who looked after us plying us with tea,

coffee and lots of tasty food to keep us going throughout both days, Gateshead Council and the stadium staff and of course, our sponsors, Start Fitness, for their generous award to the outstanding athlete each day."



Craig Sturrock receives his reward from Ian Cowan of Start Fitness after being awarded the prize for the outstanding field performance at the North East Indoor Championships

Report Bill McGuirk