

Northern Athletics Cross Country Championships 2011 1 February 2011

Steve Vernon's determined bid to win his fourth Northern title was shattered by Tom Lancashire in an epic battle over the muddy hills of Herrington Park, Sunderland.



The two outstanding Northern endurance athletes launched their duel from the start of the race with Vernon taking the initiative followed by Lancashire and Salford's Andi Jones.

Vernon and Lancashire cruised away from the rest of the field with Vernon looking as though he would retain his title until the final hill when Lancashire fought back and Steve found himself unable to respond. A disappointed Vernon was however determined to turn the tables on Lancashire in the upcoming National and Inter County events after a season which has seen him come out top in all their previous meetings and was full of praise for the Bolton athlete after the event "Naturally, I'm gutted and disappointed to relinquish my title but I was beaten not only by a good athlete but by someone who is also a great guy," said

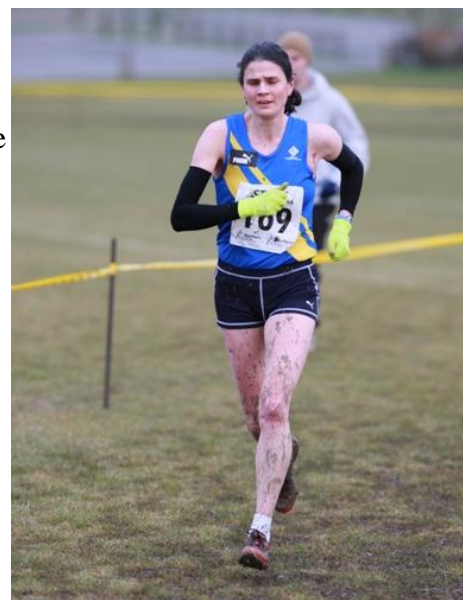
30-year-old Vernon. "I managed to open up a gap of a few seconds at the top of last hill but when Tom attacked my legs weren't strong enough to respond and I knew then it wasn't going to be my day. The Northern Championships have been good to me; yes I would have liked to have made it four senior victories to add to numerous second and third places but it wasn't to be. Now it makes me more determined to do well in the National."

A delighted Lancashire, said after receiving his gold medal: "Steve was very strong on the hills and the muddy sections of the course and he managed to open up daylight on a number of occasions. However, on the firmer parts of the course it gave me the chance to close him down and when I managed to get onto his shoulder with around a kilometre to go I surged past him so not to give him a chance to respond. Naturally, after finishing third behind Steve and Andi last year it's great to win my first Northern senior title."

Andi Jones, the runner up in 2010 and previous double winner of the Championship, stayed the course to take third place well ahead of Lincolnshire Champion Ian Kimpton who massively improved on last year's 42nd place whilst just holding off Patrick Martin of Sunderland.

Leeds City once again took the team title despite several of their leading athletes missing the race and they were led home by Simon Deakin in 12th place for their 9th title in a row. Hallamshire Harriers lifted the silver medal and Liverpool Harriers the bronze.

In the Senior Women's event Susan Partridge of Leeds City took her first Northern title after a similar three athlete battle with Rosie Smith (Durham CH) and Victoria Wilkinson (Bingley). Much of the work during the race was done by Smith as she took the lead throughout the early and middle parts of the race but eventually she was passed by Partridge and Wilkinson as



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the pace making took it's toll on the heavy course leaving them to pick up the gold and silver medals. Afterwards Partridge acknowledged Smith's contribution to the race saying "Rosie did much of the early work though Vicky and I were always there or thereabouts I was feeling comfortable throughout, possibly due to the high mileage I'm doing at the moment, and on the final hill I managed to get a gap over Vicky and then it was a case of pushing on all the way to the finish. It's great to win my first Northern title and a good way to bring down the curtain on my cross-country season!" After two wins out of two on the country - she also won the Yorkshire title – Partridge has called it a day for this season and will now concentrate on the roads as she prepares for the London Marathon in April.

Bingley's team victory came as no surprise as they had their four scorers in the top 11. Leeds City picked up the set of silver while Holmfirth headed title-holders Hallamshire by two points to take third place.

The age group races produced some fine performances with the North East celebrating a double victory in the Junior races with Elswick's Phil Hurst leading the way home in the men's race and Kate Avery (Shildon) taking the women's title. Hurst, fresh from a 3,000m pb in the Northern Indoor Championships, confidently led the field from the gun and was never headed with Derby duo Tom Bishop and Ben Connor his closest rivals. With four scorers inside 19 Derby had a clear-cut team victory ahead of Warrington with Leeds City picking up the bronze awards.

The North East fared even better in the under-20 women's race for not only did Avery take individual gold, the bronze medal went to Morpeth's Laura Weightman, the pair being separated by Spennorth's Jennifer Walsh. Avery, winner of the under-13 championship in 2005 and the under-15 the following year, got away from a disappointing low turnout of just 33 competitors, which resulted in no club managing to close in a team, after the first small loop of 2.5k and was never headed thereafter.

The closest finish of the day came in the under-17 men's 6.2k contest. Leeds City's Gordon Benson and Lewis Hogg (Gateshead) were locked together in the long uphill finishing straight after a gruelling battle which saw the lead see-saw in the final 100 metres. However, it was Hogg who managed to prevail just getting his head in front in the final 15 metres to take his first Northern title by a matter of three seconds.

East Cheshire and Tameside's Georgia Taylor-Brown was bidding to retain her under-17 women's crown but found Megan Huxley too strong on the day and had to settle for second place, 23 seconds adrift of the Vale Royal gold medallist.

The eventual winner, sixth behind Taylor-Brown at Blackburn in the 2010 championships, managed to pull away on the final hill to come home for her first-ever Northern cross-country medal.

The under-15 boys championship opened the 10-race programme at 11am when the course was frostbound but it proved no problem for Greater Manchester champion, Adam Howard. Howard, with a recent victory in the Cardiff leg of the McCain UK Cross Challenge under his belt, got away from Merseyside champion Matthew Shirling a couple of times but was reeled back until eventually getting away a final time midway round the final circuit to come home well clear of his nearest rival. Howard, sixth last year with Shirling fourth, said he

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is targeting another English Schools' vest as his main aim for the rest of the winter. Shirling, who finished 13 seconds adrift of the winner, was a similar distance ahead of third-placed Haran Dunderdale (Lincoln Wellington) who improved from finishing in 51st spot in last year's championships. Max Wharton, in eighth, led Halifax to team victory ahead of Warrington with Preston finishing third.

Bronwen Owen finished outside a medal place when finishing fourth in the under-13 girls race last year but, moving up to the under-15s proved to be no obstacle. The Scarborough athlete was always in contention in the early stages of the 4.2k contest before pulling away on the second circuit for a comfortable 25-seconds victory with Birtley's Lydia Turner, like Owen a first-year under-15, holding off Natalia Hackett (Hallamshire), who was also third last year, by just two seconds to take the silver medal.

Lincoln Wellington, led home by sixth-placed Abbie Donnelly, won the team race ahead of Blackpool, Wyre and Flyde with Wakefield finishing in third place.

Yorkshire champion Josh Schofield (City of York) held off the challenge of Joshua Laws (Trafford) and Oldham and Royton's Chris Brown to win the under-13 boys 3k event. Schofield managed to come home six seconds ahead of Greater Manchester champion Laws who held off Brown by one second to take second while Derby's Hugo Milner was a close up fourth.

Schofield picked up his second gold medal as City of York won the team event ahead of City of Sheffield and Sale.

East Cheshire and Tameside's defending under-13 champion, Bethanie Donnelly, had to be content with second place this time round after Hannah Knowles-Jones (Warrington) proved too strong on the day. Under the excited gaze of proud mum, twice former Northern senior champion Jayne Spark, Knowles-Jones eased away on the second circuit to win by 16 seconds with Donnelly finishing second, four seconds ahead of Wirral's Sophie Tarver. Knowles-Jones led Warrington's defence of their title to win once again with Stockport finishing in second place followed by Sale. [Results](#)

Report Judith Temperton

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