

BEAUTIFUL BEDALE LIVES UP TO EXPECTATIONS

By Bill McGuirk

Camp Hill Estate was the venue for the latest instalment of Northern Athletics Cross-Country Championships, the North Yorkshire venue hosting the championships for the very first time with Steve Gaines once again holding fort as organiser-in-chief who, together with Dave Paver and Bob Jackson, the Clerks of the Course, made sure that things went smoothly and smoothly they did much to the satisfaction of the many competitors and spectators who ventured to the lovely unspoiled area of Yorkshire.

Athlete numbers were down on previous years but that didn't deter a great day's sport unfolding throughout the early start to the 10-race programme.

SENIOR MEN (12.6k)

A large group headed the near 600-strong field as the first of three four-kilometre twisting circuits which, in parts, were now ankle deep in mud after the previous races, were completed. However, that was a signal for six or so athletes to push on, the group, including 2018 champion and last year's silver medallist, Carl Avery (Morpeth), Leeds City's Linton Taylor, Andrew Hayes (Hallamshire), Joe Steward (East Cheshire), Gateshead's Calum Johnson and Graham Rush, also of Leeds City. When the athletes reappeared into view before going out on the final lap, gaps began to appear among the principles as Taylor began to assert his authority on proceedings. The Lincolnshire County champion quickly managed to open up 10 metres of daylight before going out of sight as Johnson, who was contesting his first 'Northern' since claiming the junior title six years previously, led the charge to regain the lost ground. Avery, who was also third in last year's 'National', was a few metres adrift of Johnson with Steward a similar distance back in fourth place. However, things changed dramatically in the closing stages and when the leaders came back into view on the run-in to the finish it was the red-and-white vested Johnson who was in pole position to claim a superb victory by around 100 metres. Steward, who was a member of the GB&NI junior team at the European Championships in 2015 managed to get up on the line to claim his second runners-up spot - he was second in Knowsley Park in 2017 - by virtue of just one second to push Taylor back into third position. Avery, in the meantime, was a comfortable fourth as he builds up to his marathon debut later in the year. Johnson, who finished runner-up behind Avery in the North Eastern Championships, was quick to praise his rivals, especially Taylor, who he thought would go on and win after breaking away with a lap to go. "When Linton opened up a gap I felt my chances of winning had gone for I was going through a bad patch at the time and while I was still in contention I was struggling a bit," confessed the talented tri-athlete. "However, I managed to rally somehow and got back onto Linton's shoulder before easing away with about a mile to go. I knew had the strength at that point to push on which I managed to do. I had lots of support around the course which really helped me of which I'm truly grateful for when I was struggling it certainly managed to keep me going." On what he thought of the course, Johnson added: "It was tough, but a true test with muddy sections and firm patches, true cross-country."

Johnson is hoping to switch terrains for his next outing and line up in the Armagh 5k before contesting the National and Inter-Counties XC Championships.

Sale comfortably retained the team title with their six scorers finishing inside 43 as Salford claimed second place ahead of Leeds City.

SENIOR WOMEN (8k)

Two four kilometre circuits faced the contestants and it was Sheffield AC's Philippa Williams who made a brave early bid for glory by leading the field through the first kilometre by 15 metres or so in what was her first outing over the country in five years. However, the native of Newcastle, was quickly reeled in by the leaders but to her credit managed to stay in contention throughout and as the athletes came into sight after completing the first circuit Williams was just off the sharp end as

Blackburn's Jessica Judd, Mhairi MacLennan (Preston), Georgia Taylor-Brown (Sale), Leigh's Lauren Heyes and Leeds City's Jenny Walsh just headed her. As the second lap unfolded Judd, the Essex County champion and Northern bronze medallist last year behind MacLennan and Heyes, quickly began to stamp her authority on proceedings to open up a significant gap which extended to 25 seconds at the finish. Lightly-raced Taylor-Brown, the National junior champion in 2014, finished runner-up to add to her two bronze medals from previous championships while MacLennan, who was going for a hat-trick of victories, had to be content with third place this time round though to be fair admitted before setting off she wasn't in as good a shape this time round as in previous years. Behind the medallists, Walsh proved strongest to finish fourth with Heyes crossing the line in fifth ahead of a delighted Williams Judd, who finished in sixth place in the European Championships before Christmas was naturally delighted with her first Northern XC title saying: "it was tough going but I'm happy to have won and now I'm looking forward to my half-marathon debut in New York in March."

For the fourth time in a row Leeds City came out in top in the team stakes with their four scorers inside the top 12 as Sale finished runners-up ahead of Ribble Valley.

JUNIOR MEN (8k)

Two four-kilometre laps also faced the athletes and after a steady start a huge group were locked together after completing the first circuit with Cameron Allen (Houghton) just at the head of affairs. The North East athlete was shadowed by last year's runner-up Josh Dickinson (Leeds City), Cheshire champion Joe Buckley, Alex Ediker (Chesterfield) and Preston's Kian Davis. On the final lap Dickinson, who had finished in third place the previous weekend in the GB Cross Challenge in atrocious conditions in Stirling, managed to power away from his rivals to come home 22 seconds ahead of Buckley with Allan hanging on by the narrowest of margins to claim the bronze medal with fast-finishing North East champion Charlie McMillan (Gateshead) crossing line just one second behind. Dickinson admitted that he felt tired a few days after his exertions in Scotland but felt fine as the race progressed despite the muddy conditions.

Preston, led home by Davis, won team gold finishing ahead of Chesterfield with Vale Royal receiving the bronze awards.

JUNIOR WOMEN (6.2k)

Just 42 competitors faced the starter but it was Border's World XC representative Olivia Mason who stamped her authority on proceedings in a big way. After a steady start and after encouraging her younger sister Anna to 11th place in the under-17 event, Mason controlled proceedings from an early stage to lead throughout. After the first medium circuit Mason was well clear of Becky Briggs (City of Hull) in second place with a big group 20 metres or so behind. Going out into the country on the final big lap Mason had extended her advantage over Briggs with a number still in contention for a podium place. Mason, the Cumbria champion and last year's under-17 National gold medallist, came home 26 seconds clear as Humberside champion Briggs crossed the line in second place to receive the silver medal to add to the bronze she won the previous year. Yorkshire champion Katie Palfreeman (Hallamshire) managed to break free from the chasing pack to claim third place.

Only four clubs managed to close in a three-to-score team with victory going to Rotherham by just one point from Gateshead with Sale completing the one-two-three.

UNDER-17 MEN (6.2k)

This proved to be the closest finish of the day with the result not unfolding until the final 10 metres or so. After the completion of the medium lap a quartet of Archie Lowe (Middlesbrough), Matthew Knowles (Lancaster and Morecambe), Fraser Sproul (Kendal) and Raif Serif (Vale Royal) held a slight advantage. Midway through the second lap Lowe, the North East champion and Knowles the Lancashire equivalent, managed to ease away and from then it was nip-and-tuck all the way to the finish. First one would gain a yard or two and then the other. However, it was Lowe who managed to

just get his head in front to win by a stride or two. Sproul hung in to complete the podium places from the fast-finishing Finnian Hutchinson (Leeds City), Blackburn's Matthew Ramsden and Serif. After getting the verdict, Lowe, who had also competed in Stirling the previous weekend, said it was a great race all the way and he was just pleased to get ahead when it mattered most. Vale Royal, led home by Serif, won the team event from North East pair Houghton and Morpeth respectively.

UNDER-17 WOMEN (4.7k)

This age group opened the programme with over a 100 athletes eager to get the day's proceedings underway and after the initial cavalry charge eventual winner, Sale's Lara Crawford, was prominent amongst the early leaders. Also in the leading group after the completion of the small loop was Olivia Logan (Southport Waterloo), Ester Lowe-Towle (City of Sheffield and Dearne), Anna Mason (Border), Gateshead's Ines Curran and Alice Jones (Wharfedale). Midway through the second lap Crawford managed to pull away and from that point was never headed as she came home 11 seconds ahead of Rowe-Towle who held onto second place by just one second to push Jones into third spot. Longwood's Neve Hardcastle finished strongly to cross the line in fourth position. Salford, led home by eighth-placed Samantha Mason, topped the team awards with Sale finishing in second place and Hallamshire third.

UNDER-15 BOYS (4.6k)

As he had done when winning in Stirling Chris Perkins (Birtley) set out his stall from the off and his front-running tactics paid dividends once again. After the completion of the first small lap Perkins led by 15 metres or so with a small group of Luke Rawcliffe (Blackpool Were and Fylde), North Shields Poly's Josh Blevins, Jake Wilson (Vale Royal), Josh Geary (Chorley Athletic and Triathlon) and Daniel Valentine (Preston) seemingly already chasing the minor medals. Perkins, the North East Counties champion, finished fifth last year but made no mistake this time round as he eased across the line four seconds clear of a determined Wilson with Geary completing the medallists a further seven seconds adrift. Blevins was just run out of a medal place to finish fourth. Wirral, led home by fifth-placed William Strickly, won the team contest finishing ahead of Sale and Morpeth.

UNDER-15 GIRLS (4.6k)

Close on 200 athletes faced the starter and after the completion of the first small lap there was a group which included Longwood's Holly Brewster, Ella Greenaway (Cleethorpes), Jessica Bailey (Leven Valley), Kiera Brady-Jones (Wirral) and Vale Royal's Grace Roberts. When they came back into view on the run to the finish it was Cheshire champion Roberts who had opened up a significant gap which she extended to 11 seconds at the finish as Cumbria champion Bailey came through to take second place eight seconds clear of Humberside gold medallist Greenaway. It was a second gold for Roberts for she led Vale Royal to a run-away team success with Sale finishing runners-up ahead of Holmfirth.

UNDER-13 BOYS (3.08k)

North East champion Alex Bowyer (Darlington) showed a keen pair of heels to his rivals from the off and it was a case of catch me if you can. Bowyer was closely tracked in the early stages by Middlesbrough's Christy O'Hare, the duo 20 metres ahead of the main group. Bowyer kept the momentum going all the way to the finish to win by three seconds as the chasers cut into his lead in the closing stages. George Wilson (Cleethorpes) got closest to Bowyer at the finish to claim the runners-up spot with Freddie Meredith (Sale) a similar distance behind to complete the one-two-three. O'Hare finished a further two seconds back in fourth place. Sale won the team awards with Wirral finishing in second place and Ilkley third.

UNDER-13 GIRLS (3.08k)

Stirling winner Freya Murdoch (Stockport) was joined in the early stages by Lottie Langan (City of York), Maisie Belwood (Keighley and Craven), Durham City's Charlotte Dillon, Middlesbrough's Eden Creasey and Isabella Waugh (Sheffield Triathlon). But it was Yorkshire champion Belwood who proved the best on the day as she came home with a 10-second cushion over Creasey with Murdoch having to be content with third place on this occasion.

Murdoch did however receive a gold medal by leading Stockport to victory in the team event with Rotherham finishing runners-up ahead of Sale.

*THANKS go to all the marshals, technical officials and everyone who had an input however large or small in making it a hugely successful championships. And also to all the athletes who made their presence felt in one of the most picturesque art off the country=