**NORTHERN ATHLETICS 12 & 6 STAGE ROAD RELAY & YOUNG ATHLETES 5K**

It has been 3 years since this event was last held, and that was also at Birkenhead Park.

**Birkenhead Park Sunday 27th March 2022.**

Birkenhead Park is flat, with wide, well surfaced paths, so no wonder the experienced Leeds City athlete Mick Hill described the venue as “one of the best in the North.” Add to that the mild sunny weather that always appears on relay days and you have ideal conditions for racing.

First races of the day are the 5k Young Athletes, under 15 and under 17 age groups. Since their introduction, these races have become grown in popularity and give a chance for young athletes to experience the spring relay atmosphere, whilst racing themselves over a certified 5k course.

First away were the U17 men.

Gateshead Harrier Joshua Blevins was always at the front, winning in a time of 15.11.

The winning team was Wirral, something that would be repeated in these Y.A races.

Under 17 Women

Not surprisingly the winner was the talented Vale Royal athlete Holly Weedall, but she was well tracked by East Cheshire’s Emilia Platt.

Blackburn Harriers, under the watchful eye of George Davies, won the team.

Under 15 Boys

Oscar Schofield is a very talented athlete who, under the guidance of coach Trevor Painter, will progress to a high level in athletics. Oscar won the race, but was pushed hard by Freddie Meredith, one of the talented group of young athletes from Trafford, guided by Neil Canham. Making his area competitive debut for Salford was Alfie Simons, eldest son of international athlete Bev Simons, nee Jenkins. Wirral won the team race as well as the B Team award.

Under 15 Girls.

Stockport’s Freya Murdoch won by some 28 seconds over the Leven Valley athlete Georgia Bell, with Salford picking up the team gold.

**Women’s 6 Stage**

The current championship holders, 2019 winners Rotherham Harriers, finished 11th on that first long leg. Jenny Blizard running the short 2nd leg pulled up one place, but the Yorkshire club were not to retain their crown finishing in 6th position.

Vale Royal were not even at the 2019 event, yet they were 1st back on leg 1. Abigail Howarth had the 2nd fastest long leg time of the day 26.33, and were never out of the top 2 positions after that, to finish winners by 36 seconds.

Hallamshire Harriers were an incomplete team in 2019, but since then have clearly improved. 5th on the first leg they moved into the top 3 places for the remainder of the race, holding 2nd position for the last 3 legs, with their 6th leg runner Lauren Heyes pulling out the equal fastest short leg time of the day 12.38. The last leg also producing the same fastest time for Wirral athlete Sophie Tarver as she moved her club up 3 places into 7th place.

The final podium position was taken by Salford Harriers, as they continue to build impressively. 5th in 2019, their youthful team anchored around Samantha Mason, and coached by her dad Duncan, held 3rd place for the last 3 legs, finishing some 95 seconds ahead of 4th placed Liverpool Harriers.

Fastest long leg of the day belonged to Blackburn’s Jessica Judd on 4th leg, with a time of 25.25, 18 seconds faster than her 2019 time. Her efforts pulled Blackburn up some 9 places into 9th where they finished.

The absence of a Leeds women’s team was somewhat surprising, but they will no doubt appear at the National on April 9th,

**Men’s 12 Stage**

The impressive stats about Leeds City A.C men’s 12 stage team. They won this event in 2019 heading the field in every one of the last 11 stages. Their winning time was 3.0643 and they had the fastest short time by Phillip Sesemann on leg 11, 10.54 and the fastest long leg times by Emile Cairess on leg 5, 22.46.

Fast forward three years and again they were first to finish in the last 11 stages, and had an overall faster time by over 2 minutes than their 2019 performance. However they were only fastest on the long leg, Phillip Sesemann on the 7th leg, 22.26. Sale’s Nigel Martin had the fastest short leg 11 .02 just ahead of Harry Wakefield, Salford, 11.07. ( Leeds did have 3 athletes in the top 10 short leg fastest times )

Interesting that their B team, 9th in 2019, improved to 8th this year and were just under 2 minutes faster.

It was Liverpool Harrier David Devine who broke the Leeds monopoly, winner of that first leg in 22.47 before the team slowly dropped back finishing 6th

The experienced Salford team, reinforced by Harry Wakefield, achieved 2nd place in 10 of the 12 stages, Thomas Cornthwaite 9th on leg 1, Michael Clayton 5th on leg 2 being the exceptions. Salford were 3rd in 2019, so they continue to improve and return the club to the mantle it held in the glory days of Stan Curran and Bev Jenkins.

The top 2 clubs continued to pull away but behind them was a battle for that final podium position. Blackburn held that position for 6 of the stages with Hallamshire close to them and Morpeth finishing strongly, then a gap to Liverpool and Sale.

Leg 9 had Blackburn slip to 4th as Morpeth passed them, and Hallamshire 5th. No change on leg 10, but with the finish fast approaching, leg 11 had significant changes, as Hallamshire moved up from 5th to 4th and Blackburn down to 5th.

The last leg was all change again. Morpeth lost 2 places to finish 5th. Blackburn had Tim Raynes move up one place to 4th and Hallamshire, so often trailing these other 2 clubs, had Euan Brown’s 4th fastest short leg of the day to move them into the bronze medal position for the first and only time in the race.

Northern Athletics President Margaret Brooks made the presentation to the 3 winning teams before they went away to fill in their entry for the ERRA Nation on April 9th.

Whilst Leeds City and Salford dominate the North, they face tough opposition at the National. In the Midlands the Notts 12 stage team matched Leeds by winning 11 of the 12 stages and there is always the challenge of the strong Southern clubs.

Leeds are holders of the English 12 stage Championship and on April 9th they can also challenge for the British Championship, as the top 3 clubs from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have been invited to Sutton Park, with podium medals to be won, as well as bragging rights.