

AFTER an interlude of 13 years the Start Fitness-supported Northern Cross-Country Championships returned to the North East with Sedgefield Harriers, the main hosts, pulling out all the stops to make it a day to remember for all local and visiting athletes and supporters. On a breezy, cold day the County Durham club, which was only formed in 2005, laid out a testing, twisting course over East Park which was relatively mud-free despite recent heavy rainfall in the region.

SENIOR MEN (12.1k)

Close on 500 faced the starter, slightly down on previous years, however, you can only beat whoever is on the start line which proved a second Northern senior success for local hero Callum Johnson who also triumphed in Bedale in 2020 before doing likewise in the National later in the year. After a cautious start, Johnson, the 2022 Inter Counties champion, moved up into the leading bunch of three - Angus McMillan (City of York), Matthew Ramsden (Blackburn) and Morpeth's Carl Avery, who had broken away inside the first kilometre. Midway through the first of three circuits around the County Durham landscape, the Gateshead international forged to the front going into the second lap, quickly opening up a gap of around 50 metres over his closest rivals with his advantage more than doubling at the bell with McMillan, a GB under-23 international at the Euro Cross in Brussels in December, forging clear of Ramsden, last year's Northern under-20 gold medallist, with Avery slightly losing touch. Going into the final 3k the leading positions stayed the same as Johnson, cheered home loudly by local supporters down the home straight, crossed the line with a 30 seconds cushion over McMillan who had a similar gap over Ramsden at the line. Avery, last year's runner-up in Blackburn, just missed out on a podium place, finishing fourth on this occasion. Defending champion, Joe Steward (Hallamshire) came home in sixth place. Leeds City, with their sextet all inside the top 22 and led home by another solid run from Graham Rush in seventh position, retained their team title ahead of Salford and Hallamshire. Before making it onto the podium I caught up with

a happy Johnson who was by no means out of breath after his sterling effort and commented: "I didn't feel I had to go off really hard at the start and maybe suffer a bit in the later stages so the plan was to pull back the leaders gradually before the completion of the first lap and that's what I did. Once I hit the front I felt really comfortable and just concentrated all the way to the finish. It was great having so much support all around the course which I greatly appreciated and I can now concentrate on the National and the Inter-Counties with a great deal of confidence."

SENIOR WOMEN (8.1k)

In-form Lauren McNeil powered home to make it a Hallamshire one-two with team-mate Lauren Heyes taking the silver medal ahead of Wirral's Sophie Turner. The trio were quickly noticeable at the head of affairs with last year's runner-up, Middlesbrough's Phillipa Stone, working hard to stay in contention a few metres behind. Approaching the commencement of the second of two circuits, McNeil, who finished a fine second the previous weekend in Parliament Hill, surged ahead, quickly opening up a significant gap over her main rivals which had extended to 25 seconds at the line. Heyes, the current Derbyshire champion and World Cross representative in 2013, finished a comfortable second a similar distance ahead of third-placed Turner, who was a bronze medallist as a junior at the Euro Cross in 2008. Stone, meanwhile, finished a comfortable fourth this time round. Despite having the first two home Hallamshire, had to be content with second place in the team section behind the all-conquering Leeds City outfit who had their four scorers all inside the top 10, Jennifer Walsh leading the Yorkshire quartet home in sixth place, followed by Eleanor Curran (7th), Nora Gmuer (8th) and Georgia Malir (10th). Sale Harriers Manchester finished in third place. Before stepping onto the podium to receive her gold award McNeil said: "I'm happy with that for I didn't know what to expect after last week. However, despite all the twists and turns and the wind being quite strong at times, I'm very pleased with my performance. Once I hit the front it was a case of keeping my concentration all the way to the

line. Now I can look forward to the National but before I go can I thank all the officials who do an amazing job and to all the marshalls out on the course.”

JUNIOR MEN (8.1k)

Twelve months ago in Blackburn Josh Blevins finished 13th in Blackburn in this age group, however the Gateshead athlete made a mockery of that result with an exhibition of how to front run despite it not being in his pre-race plans. The Tynesider eased to the front early in the contest despite having last year’s under-17 champion, Liam McCay, and last year’s under-20 bronze medallist, Finlay Grant, amongst his rivals. Once ahead, Blevins, who claimed the Northern under-13 title back in 2005 as a North Shields Poly athlete, continued to cut out a lone furrow to eventually come home 22 seconds clear of Grant with McCay a further 12 seconds back in third place as Morpeth’s William Owen De Vere tried desperately to close him down only to finish fourth after a strong last lap. De Vere, however, still managed to take his place on top of the podium as he led his Northumbrian trio to team victory - Joe Dixon 7th and Bertie Marr (20th) the other scorers. Rossendale finished runners-up with Rotherham receiving the bronze awards.

JUNIOR WOMEN (5.7k)

Despite only 37 finishers it proved to be the closest finish of the day with just three seconds separating the medallists at the line. A group of three broke away going into the second circuit and the trio were still locked together making the turn into the home straight. However, it was Yorkshire champion and last year’s Northern under-17 champion and Mountain World Cup under-18 bronze medallist, Amelia Lane who was to prevail, the Wharfedale athlete holding off Blackburn’s Isobel Holt by just one second with Preston’s Libby Hunter crossing the line in third place a further two seconds behind. Sale, led home by seventh-placed Lucy Armitage, claimed team honours ahead of Derby AC and Salford. Lane, on receiving her

medal, said being a mountain runner would have wanted a few hills however, getting a win as a first year junior is no mean achievement and I have to be happy.

UNDER-17 MEN (5.7k)

Blackburn's Yorkshire champion, Jonson Hughes, fourth last year, proved strongest as he came home seven seconds clear of Cheshire silver medallist Freddie Meredith (Trafford) with Warrington's Jack Marwood a further six seconds back in third place. Meredith returned to the podium together with Jay Hutchinson (12th), Josh Watson (35th) and James Walton (36th) as winners of the team race to finish ahead of Keighley and Craven and Derby AC. Hughes, who took the lead midway through the second lap was naturally pleased with his performance saying afterwards: "I wasn't feeling too well during the week and wasn't sure whether to run or not but I'm pleased I did now!"

UNDER-17 WOMEN (4.7k)

Yorkshire champion Lottie Langan added the under-17 title to the under-15 gold medal she won two years ago. The City of York athlete produced a strong finish to relegate mountain running international, Georgia Bell (Leven Valley) into second place nine seconds behind, Bell just getting the better of Salford's Sophia Roiditis by a metre or so with both athletes being recordingd the same time. Roiditis was back on the podium with team-mates Darcy Slattery (10th), Jasmine Wright (12th) and Marissa Caldwell (19th) to receive team gold medals ahead of Rotherham and North Shields Poly.

UNDER-15 BOYS (3.8k)

Salford's Evan Grime showed no weariness after his exertions the previous weekend at Parliament Hill where he finished second in the British Cross Challenge, to comfortably claim his second Northern title having won in Pontefract in 2022. Grime crossed the line 20 seconds clear of English Schools' bronze medallist Pio Aron (Trafford) with Yorkshire champion Yaried Alem a further three seconds back in

third place. Aron, backed up by Emmas Dobson (5th), Adrian White (10th) and Tim Ye (16th) were clear team winners ahead of Hallamshire and Blackburn.

UNDER-15 GIRLS (3.8k)

Liverpool's Holly Cross made up for the Merseyside Championships being cancelled with a superb victory. After a steady start, the 2023 bronze medallist came through to win by nine seconds ahead of Lincoln Wellington's Ellarose Whitworth who held off Rotherham's Maya Schofield by four seconds to claim the silver medal. Cross was back on the top off the podium for a second time with club-mates Erin Fry (8th), Rebecca Murphy (10th) and Bailey Hughes (13th) to claim team gold ahead of Rotherham and City of York. Cross commented after collecting her medals saying: "I was hoping to make the top three but I'm happy to have won."

UNDER-13 BOYS (2.9k)

It was a North East one-two with victory going to Middlesbrough's Thomas McCartie who had 16 seconds in hand over Morpeth's Ewan Line who had finished in third place in the NE Championships behind McCartie's winning run. Cheshire's silver medallist Oliver Davenport (Warrington) finished in third place. The Hallamshire quartet of Jacob Dawe (7th), Beau Pronesti (9th), Max Taylor (21st) and Olly Howson (37th), won the team stakes ahead of Warriors Pentathlon and Preston. Afterwards McCartie, who ran in leggings, admitted it was a tough course but was delighted to have won.

UNDER-13 GIRLS (2.9k)

Another close finish entailed with just six seconds covering the top five with victory going to Yorkshire champion Ruth Friend (Leeds City) who crossed the line two seconds ahead of Warriors Pentathlons' Eve Beddow with Beddow's team-mate, Isla Yorke, another two seconds adrift after holding off New Marske's Gabrielle Pinder by one second to claim the bronze award. Sale's Beatrix Soper was a further second back in fifth place. The new champion commented afterwards: I got a

rubish start and it wasn't until midway that I eventually caught up with the leaders before easing to the front with around 500 metres to go and then it was a case of jus hanging on until the line!"

**A huge thanks to Sedgefield Harriers and particularly to Chris Lines for his input in making it another highly-successful NA XC Championships; to all the technical officials and marshalls who were at their posts throughout the long day; to the first aid team and to the local authority for without whose permission the championships could not have taken place. A special note of thanks to all the local dignitaries who were on hand throughout the day to help our president with the presentations.

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