

South of England Cross Country Championships at Parliament Hill Fields
30th January 2010

Finally, after the Kent Championships and Kent Schools Championships being postponed, our distance runners got the chance for a competitive outing and it came in the form of the second biggest club event of the Winter season.

I must admit that, as we drove through parts of North London at 8am and saw a sprinkling of snow on the ground, I wondered if the Health and Safety team would have been out to cancel the event ! Luckily the sun came out and the initially frozen underfoot conditions turned to mud.

The Tonbridge squad ended up with four team medals, which was just one short of the best ever performance of five medals in 2007. However, on top of that George Duggan and Grace Nicholls won individual medals, the first athletes to do this for TAC since Michael Mason's under 15 silver, again in 2007.

Under 15 Boys

This was the first race of the day and we had a good squad competing. Shaftesbury had won both the National cross country and road relays in the Autumn and duly won this. However, if things go our way we can topple them in the National as, if Charlie Joslin-Allen had finished and run to form we would have won. Also I believe that there is more to come from Tom Devlin (ankle injury recently), Max Nicholls (fractured toe recently) and Sean Molloy (hopefully on the up, now he is training a little more each week).

Charlie had gone with the lead group early on, but dropped out not far into the race, feeling a very tight hamstring. This left us in a position where we could easily have missed out on medals altogether. However, this squad like many that we have, has some depth and they came through with silver medals.

Under 13 Girls

Our four girls all had what I would consider to be good runs, each putting at least 100 athletes behind them. Sian Driscoll led the team home.

Under 13 Boys

We had more drama in this race, before, during and after ! We lost two potential scorers in Tim Faes and Will Seymour, who pulled out ill a day or so beforehand. We also lost Will Whitmore from the squad, another county standard athlete. On top of this Will Roud was unlikely to be at his best, having not run all week, after a rugby injury.

This was all before the race started and when it did George Duggan managed to lose a spiked shoe in the mud, around the halfway mark ! George bravely continued, near the front of the race and battled all the way to the finish. He only gave way to the eventual winner in the last 50 metres, having also slipped over in the mud. Without his efforts the chance of a team gold would have gone. Not only did he end up with a team medal, but his mates somehow found his lost shoe.

Whilst George headed for the St John's Ambulance tent, his team mates gave great support. The next two scorers, Stuart Brown and Euan Nicholls, will be under 13s next year, whilst Miles Weatherseed closed in the team. Miles was the athlete who took on my request to the whole TAC squad to 'rise to the occasion', in the absence of others. He probably never thought he would win a team gold medal in the days

leading up to the event. Of the others I would pick out Peter Laing, who had a stunning run for 55th place and has come on leaps and bounds this Winter.

Under 15 Girls

We witnessed one of the fastest starts by a TAC athlete as Pandora Banbury was in 2nd place at the top of the first hill. I asked her why she started so quick and she said that she “just got a bit excited!”. In the circumstances she did well to finish quite strongly in 68th.

Alice Wood had possibly her best race to date for 17th, whilst still qualifying for this race next year. She was backed up by Sussex Schools Champ, Nicole Taylor, whose 24th position was a massive improvement on 75th last year.

Dominique Von Oppel had a very good run to be our 4th scorer, having only agreed to race on Thursday evening.

Under 17 Men

This has been one of the most competitive age groups all Winter and it was Richard Goodman from Shaftesbury Barnet that won. He has been in top form all season, even making the GB under 20 team and placing 5th in the European Championships.

Once again there was more stress for the TAC team manager as two of our likely scorers had not arrived 15 minutes before the start. Luckily they did make it, but with a curtailed warm up did well to perform as they did.

As it turned out Aldershot were superb and no matter how well our guys ran, it would have been extremely difficult to change the result from silver to gold. However, Josh Bentham had a superb run for 6th, matching his place in last year's race. Henry Pearce was also excellent, in his first ever race at this level, to take 14th.

The most pleasing aspect was the depth that we had in this group, so much so that our B-team ie athletes 5 to 8 would have placed 4th team. Jamie Bryant somehow produced a storming run in 27th, having been ill in the first half of January, Tom Cox's 34th was well deserved after an excellent Winter's training of regularly doing six days per week and Ryan Driscoll in 42nd was “well pleased” to beat some of his rivals from Sussex.

Jack Keywood and Will Mitham also placed well inside the top half of the field and it was particularly good to see Will having his first race since September.

Under 20 Women

It was easier for spectators this year to see how the race was developing, since the organisers did not run it with the under 17s. Soon after the start we could see that not many clubs had four scorers and as the event developed I could see that we were in with a shout.

Grace led the way, but thankfully Petra Pavlovic had agreed to race a few days beforehand and it was this that secured the team win. Catherine Symons and Jess Owen both ran strongly and hopefully the team can put in another solid performance in the National and perhaps challenge for a medal.

Under 17 Women

This was another event where we almost didn't have a team. Abblie Shepherd-Barron had been ill all week and couldn't make it and a couple of others had

alternative commitments. Somehow we got Maisie Farndon to make up the team and help them to an excellent 6th place.

Ellen Holmes openly admitted that she enjoyed the event, but I am sure has one eye on the track season already. Lucy Reid and Lucy Blackstone had solid runs.

Under 20 Men

Just 8 points separated us from another team medal, which was frustrating. However, Andy Combs and Sam Bradley produced the highest positions by TAC athletes, in this race, for more than 20 years.

Senior Men

We had no senior ladies entered, but Huw Evans took on the men's 9 miles championship and had a good run for 41st, which was one place higher than he achieved a couple of years ago.

Not far behind him, two TAC 2nd claim members, Julian Rendall and Ben Reynolds were performing for Thames Hare and Hounds.

Summary

Overall it was an excellent day and some good results were achieved, thanks to many athletes training so well for the six weeks prior, despite the poor weather and no races.

There is always a hint of 'what might have been' and this was certainly the case at Parliament Hill. Perhaps this is the feeling that keeps us all going, in the hope that one day everything will go perfectly.

A few odd statistics for those that like them –

- George Duggan 2nd – TAC first ever under 13 boys' individual medal.
- Under 13 boys team – 6th year in a row that TAC has won medals.
- Under 15 boys team – 5th year in a row that TAC has won medals.
- Under 17 men's team – 4th year in a row that TAC has won medals.
- Andy Combs 9th in u20s is highest place TAC athlete in this age group since 1987.
- Grace Nicholls – first TAC female medal this century.
- Josh Bentham – under 17, 6th equalled highest placed TAC this century.
- Alice Wood – under 15, 17th was highest placed TAC this century.
- Women's under 20 win – first ever TAC medal in this age group.
- Under 17 men – 10 athletes was the most ever TAC in this race.
- Under 20 women – 4 athletes was the most ever TAC in this race.

Well done to everyone and many thanks to all the coaches who helped with warm ups and race preparation. Hopefully, this was just a dress rehearsal for an even better performance at the National Championships at Leeds on 27th February.

Mark Hookway
Team Manager