

## Fell and Hill Relays 2022

This year's British Athletics Fell & Hill Running Championships was hosted by Carnethy Hill Racing Club. The event took place at Broughton Heights in the Scottish Borders. Newcastle AC have a long history of participating in the relays and are the only club from Northern Ireland in recent years to make the journey over. Race Director Iain Whiteside, originally from Larne, made sure we had a warm welcome and the organisers and volunteers put on a fantastic event. The courses for each leg provided an excellent variety of terrain, fast running, grassy descents, and sharp, lung-busting climbs with many of the legs running over ridges which provided excellent views for the runners but also impressive sights for those spectating in the event field.

Newcastle AC entered three teams in the Male Open, Female Open and V50 Male categories with a total of 18 runners representing the club and 5 supporters travelling. When I joined Newcastle AC many years ago the club was mainly older men (some grumpy – we won't mention any names!!) however over time this has changed. Whilst we entered a V50 team for the first time (the old men are getting older!), we also had strong female and junior representation which is great to see and promising is the future of the Newcastle AC. The club is holding a 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner to celebrate next month, and this event shows the club is going from strength to strength.

A lot of planning in the months leading up to the event takes place behind the scenes. The hotel was booked at the start of the year, and during the summer teams were selected from the club. Of course, when organising trips away, a bus full of maybes needed whittled down in advance to the definites. Two weeks before the event we were down three men in the V50 team. Deon McNeilly suggested asking Gerry Kingston. Deon and Gerry were old rivals in the 2-day Mourne Mountain Marathon, with great racing between the pair for a number of years. Deon thought Gerry would be sold on running the navigation leg reminiscing about old times. In the final hour Stevie Rice, Mickey Cunningham and Gerry Kingston saved the day and completed the V50 team. Stevie and Mickey were easy pleased however Gerry was full of requests and to keep him happy the organisers obliged, which included making sure he had an allocated seat at the front of the bus, and not running the leg with Deon!

On Friday the bus, driven by James Rogan, left Donard Park filled with runners and traybakes, (thanks Linda!), all raring to go. After a comfortable journey the team arrived safely in Dumfries, and only had to find the hotel. Deon and the Prophet were up front giving directions to James and somehow they managed to drive right past the hotel. After finally arriving, the men were shocked at how they had missed it, Marty McMullan pointed out the bright green Holiday Inn was a bit of a give-away! Everyone made their way to their rooms to get kit ready for the next day. There was a bit of initial panic at check-in, as it turned out Deon and Pete had a double. Thankfully Deon managed to swap rooms for a twin and crisis was diverted. To settle some pre-race nerves a few night caps were the order of the day. Sinead, who had been a little apprehensive before getting on the bus was saying herself and Donna would be fine and planned to run the course the next day with their soft flasks topped up with wine! Discussion moved to the hotel, and Gerry and the Prophet who were still in their rooms, jokingly laughed that they might have a double! Gerry arrived down and it turned out they did! After a quick discussion with the hotel manager, it turned out that an error had been made making up the rooms and that in fact all the rooms were made up as doubles when they should have been twins, and that this explained why a man called down asking for an extra bed sheet! Thankfully the hotel staff were able sort out the mistake and it gave us all a good laugh.

On the morning of the race everyone had breakfast and made their way to the bus for the hour-drive to the race venue at Broughton Heights, in the Scottish Borders. Torrential rain was forecast, however it was set to clear for later in the morning, before raining again late in the afternoon – the organisers appeared to even organise the weather! The event had been based in the centre of a horseshoe of hills with great views of the top of the peaks, including Cat Cleuch Head, Trahenna Hill, Hammer Head, Broomy Side, Clover Law and the ridges and cols in between. The Broughton Hills were a pleasure to run over, with fast grassy ridge running, combined with tussocks, bog and heather. It would be comparable to the Meels back home in the Mourne, however with far fewer rocks. On arrival the sun was shining, and visibility was excellent which bode well for navigation. To make sure you never forgot you were in Scotland, the Carnethy organised a piper to play for a good solid 8 hours! At one point, an umbrella was held over the piper so he could continue to play even when a rain shower passed by towards the end of the day.

***The start of the first leg:***



The relays comprise of four Legs: Legs 1 and 4 are solo legs and Legs 2 and 3 are run in pairs with Leg 3 requiring navigation. The first leg was a mass start, and up first, representing Newcastle AC were Ethan McMullan, Ciara Savage and Mickey Cunningham. The route included a figure eight which meant spectators could watch the runners start, run along the ridge from Hammer Head to Trahenna Hill before a notorious 'slippy bridge' and a steep climb known as 'Geordie's Wall', named after local farmer Geordie, who looks after the land and is well into his 80s! The route followed the ridge before returning to the event field and the relay changeover where leg 2 runners were ready and waiting. Ethan was first home in 74<sup>th</sup> position overall and 42<sup>nd</sup> in the Male Open category. Next in was Ciara in 149<sup>th</sup> position overall and 25<sup>th</sup> in the Female Open category. Closely followed by Mickey Cunningham, in his first run representing Newcastle AC and only 2 weeks back to running after a knee injury in 165<sup>th</sup> position overall and 9<sup>th</sup> in the V50 category. Ethan and Ciara done exceptionally well running as juniors against a senior field of runners, including top names in the fell and hill running scene. The course was 8km long with 550m of climbing.

***Leg 1 runners Ethan McMullan, Ciara Savage and Mickey Cunningham:***





Next up was the first pairs leg of the day. The course started on a steep climb towards Grey Yade, following the ridge to the summit of Hammerhead, before descending into a rougher valley and a steep climb up Flint Hill and then towards Brown Dodd, another descent towards a stream junction followed by another steep climb up to the summit of Pyked Stane Hill, over the summit of Green Law, skiting the west side of Broomy Side, and over to the top of Clover Law summit. The final descent into the valley and towards the event field for the leg 3 changeover. The route included 890m of climbing over 11.2km. First in for Newcastle AC was Pearse Brogan and Mickey Flynn (112<sup>th</sup> overall and 50<sup>th</sup> in their category), followed by Pete Grant and Deon McNeilly (98<sup>th</sup> overall and 8<sup>th</sup> in their category) and Donna Daly and Sinead Flynn (159<sup>th</sup> overall and 29<sup>th</sup> in their category).

***Leg 2 runners Pearse Brogan, Mickey Flynn, Donna Daly, Sinead Flynn, Deon McNeilly and Pete Grant:***







The third leg is a navigation leg where the course is unknown to competitors until they are handed a map at the start. The runners sussed out the terrain and the routes the other legs were going and correctly predicted there would be a lot of contouring involved. The first few checkpoints were long legs which involved a sharp climb to start towards Cat Cleuch Head, contouring round Trahenna Hill over to the top of Louden Knowe. The third checkpoint involved crossing some rougher terrain through a valley and up Hog Knowe followed by a long leg behind Hammer Head to a bog at Broomy Side. From there a descent to a sheep fold at the top of Stirkfield Hope Burn and then a contour round Clover Law and a steep descent to checkpoint 6 and another steep climb that cut across the Leg 4 route to the valley before two final checkpoints close by the Event Field. David Hicks and Alan Ritchie were first in for Newcastle AC (43<sup>rd</sup> overall and 30<sup>th</sup> in their category), followed by Gerry Kingston and Stevie Rice (121<sup>st</sup> overall and 8<sup>th</sup> in their category) and Sam McNeilly and Steffi Warnock (132<sup>nd</sup> overall and 22<sup>nd</sup> in their category). This was Steffi's first time running in Newcastle colours since joining the club. The third leg included 900m of climbing over 10.2km.

***Leg 3 runners Alan Ritchie, David Hicks, Stevie Rice, Gerry Kinston, Sam McNeilly and Steffi Warnock:***







The fourth and final leg of the day covered 7.8km with 520m of climbing and started with a sharp climb up Geordie's Wall before following the ridge to the summit of Clover Law. A descent towards the col and joining the main path in the valley before a steep climb up the ridge to the summit of Hammerhead. From there, an undulating ridge and a fast, grassy descent to the event field and the finish. Owen Brady was first in for Newcastle AC (114<sup>th</sup> overall and 50<sup>th</sup> in their category), followed by Catherine McIntosh (131<sup>st</sup> overall and 23<sup>rd</sup> in their category) and Seamus White (168<sup>th</sup> overall and 9<sup>th</sup> in their category). Knowing he would be on the final leg, Seamus had opted for a hat with an integrated head torch, just in case his club mates were out that little bit longer than anticipated!

***Leg 4 Runners Owen Brady, Catherine McIntosh and Seamus White:***





For those who would listen, the Prophet provided commentary and predictions throughout the day, and words of wisdom and support to those running. The Prophet asked Pearse if he really enjoyed the last pull to the finish whilst trying not to vomit. For the final leg, those who had gathered round the Prophet heard him correctly predict Owen Brady would stop running and go into a power hike on the 3<sup>rd</sup> flag up Geordie's Wall. The Prophet and Marty McMullan covered at least 30km between them and over 1,000m of ascent in a bid to get the best action shots of their club mates. At one stage I overheard over the sound of bagpipes, the mention of seals nibbling toes and knew it could only come from one man. The Leitrim tones must have gravitated fellow country men as he had appeared to have been talking to every Irish person in the field.

The overall combined results for the relay were: Newcastle Male Open Team: 75<sup>th</sup> overall and 46<sup>th</sup> in their category, Newcastle V50 Team: 140<sup>th</sup> overall and 9<sup>th</sup> in their category, and Newcastle Female Open Team: 142<sup>nd</sup> overall and 26<sup>th</sup> in their category.

***Out on the course:***



The Holiday Inn in Dumfries provided excellent hospitality and set up a private function room for our evening dinner. The rain that had stayed at bay most the day arrived and put most off the idea of venturing into town for a few drinks. Everyone stayed at the hotel for a few celebratory drinks after dinner. That is everyone but Alan and Pearse, who didn't arrive back until Gerry and Steffi were out running the following morning, having by the sounds of things, visited every night club Dumfries, including a club aptly names 'Chancers'!

There were a few sore heads on Sunday morning on the journey home. The Prophet provided a speech to round up the weekend in which he congratulated each team on a top three NI finish and thanked everyone organising on a fantastic weekend away and Mickey C. thanked Stevie for washing his feet on Saturday. After dropping off Gerry in Lisburn, the Prophet said he was suffering from separation anxiety and couldn't wait until the next event.

Newcastle AC would like to thank Carnethy HRC for organising a fantastic event and to all the volunteers who gave us such a warm welcome, at registration, at the catering tent, and on the course from all the marshals. A special thanks to James Rogan for his excellent driving, getting us safely there and back again, and of course a massive thank you to the Prophet, Tracy Savage, Marty McMullan and Linda Rogan for all the support and Linda for her wonderful baking. Thanks and well done to everyone who ran and did a stellar job representing the club and Northern Ireland. We have already pencilled in the diary for next year!

***Some more photos of the crew:***

















**Relay Changeovers:**



***Some action shots:***















***Back at the hotel:***





*The Prophet's legendary speech:*

