

McGrady Financial Services Junior XC Series 2022

Race 3 – Tollymore

Race Report by Siobhan Grant

And here we are at the end of another McGrady Financial Services Cross-Country series. Although this series was shorter than previous years, it was a cautious and gradual return to normality after a break due to Covid and a welcome return to racing for many young athletes.

As the junior running community continues to grow at an exponential rate, it has not only brought with it more pairs of feet to the sport but many wonderful sights of camaraderie, inclusion and many moments to treasure for not just the young athletes but their supporters and their clubs. This series has demonstrated that running isn't just a sport, it's a community of trust, respect, encouragement and love where everyone wants each other to be the best they can be.

As the sun rose over a glistening monument at Tollymore early on Sunday morning, it was clear that we were in for an unusual treat of blue skies and sunshine for our final race, in contrast to the dismal and dull weather that engulfed Delamont only weeks previously. The weather also brought with it an increase in the number of supporters. With Tollymore bustling due to the weather, this was a perfect opportunity to showcase local Junior Cross Country and the young athletes didn't fail to impress from our P4 and Unders to the 'big boys and girls.'

Up first was the P4 and Under race. As before, we welcomed an energetic and smiley group of runners. Some as young as 4 toeing the line to take on the 500m to the finishing flags. Taking off like a rocket, Harry McVeigh of Newcastle AC was a man on a mission as he made light work of the course to cross the line in 1.36, 21 seconds ahead of clubmate, Rossa McAleenan who fought to secure his place in a multi club battle between him, East Downs Ozzy Ferguson and Murlough ACs Jamie McMullan who took 2nd, 3rd and 4th respectively. The girls race played out very much the same way. Amelia Armstrong of Dromore AC cruised to first place in a time of 2.05. Only 10 seconds behind her, Teigan O'Gorman and Elizabeth Houston held off late surges from the others to secure second and third place.

The P5 group continued to keep the excitement rolling on through to the next race. It was Dromore ACs John McElroy who crossed the line first over the 750m distance. Murlough ACs Fionn O'Rourke and Senan Gosling earned themselves second and third place. The girls race had everyone on tender hooks from the off. Emily Kerr of Newcastle AC and Mia McCormick of Dromore AC matched each other stride by stride until the final 100m when Emily made her bid to secure first place, crossing the line in 3.12 followed by Mia in 3.15 and Gemma McStay of Burren AC, in third.

Drama was not amiss in the P6 Boys and Girls races either. With Murlough's Ryan Thornton leading from the gun, he was chased every step of the way by Dromore's Ruairi Coffey and Newcastle's Connaire Og McVeigh. A miscommunication near the end did hail grasps from spectators but the boys crossed the line in the rightful order. A fast and strong start for Saorlaith McAleenan in the girls race, cemented her dominance in her age category throughout this series. Even a minor blip in the closing stages was mended and she made it three wins in three. She was soon joined by Newcastle AC clubmates Alana Flynn and Lily Murray for a full podium for the club.



P6 boys race becomes a multi-club battle for podium

The P7 race was the first mixed race of the day and brought a new dynamic with it. With many of the runners taking part in the NI Primary XC finals on Thursday, legs were weary but the memories of that race were still fresh in their minds. Paddy Sherrard from Murlough AC set a strong pace from the start and was quickly followed by Darragh Kerr of Newcastle AC. Training partners, Fiachna McAleenan, Newcastle AC and Maisie McVeigh Murlough AC used each other to pace out the first lap in behind the two leading boys. Fiachna timed his assault on the leading boys and produced an explosive finish to edge his way into first and hold off Paddy just long enough to seal the victory. Darragh took third place with a strong finish. Maisie quickly followed in behind Darragh to take first place for the girls with Mollie Tumilty of Dromore AC a mere three seconds behind and team mate Daisy Douglas finishing the podium positions for this category.



Fiachna McAleenan and Maisie McVeigh pace of each other in the P7 race

The Year 8 boys race, picked up where it left off in Delamont last month. The battle between Newcastle's Aaron O'Boyle and Henry Houston continued and offered spectators a phenomenal race experience. Shoulder to shoulder for 1000m, Aaron broke free by gradually pushing the pace in the closing stages earning first place in 4.49. Henry followed shortly after in 4.55 with fellow club mate Jamie O'Flaherty putting in a powerful finish to take third. Erin Easton of Newcastle AC, was the first lady across the line in the Year 8 race, running a steady and controlled run to secure her place for three wins in three. She was soon joined on the line by East Down's Jessica Maring and Burren AC's Maria McStay.

The Year 9 race saw a flawless run from East Down's Alexander Robinson who was in a class of his own completing the 1600m in 5.12. Behind him, his two club mates fought for second and third place with Thomas Magee taking second and Finn Gibney coming third. The Year 9 girls race was won by Dromore ACs Emma Stewart with Ava McArdle from Burren AC and Sarah Gilchrist of East Down, taking second and third.



East Down ACs Thomas Magee and Finn Gibney battle it out for position in the Year 9 boys race

It was an East Down 1-2 for the Year 10 boys with Aaron Lennon and Conan Pleasants taking first and second place in 6.18 and 6.47 respectively. Newcastle ACs Euan McIntosh put in a strong race to finish third in 6.52. The Year 10 girls race was too close to call. Rebekah Wilson from East Down AC crossed the line to comfortably take first place and was followed by such a close finish between Newcastle ACs Megan O'Boyle and East Down's Hollie Noade, it had to be called as a draw.



A strong field in the Year 10 race

It was certainly a case of saving the best for last. The Year 11 race produced stunning examples of race strategies, calculated risks and sheer grit and determination. Many of these young men and young ladies have progressed through the McGrady's Cross Country ranks throughout the past number of years and have tried and tested all the tricks in the book. Ethan McMullan of Newcastle AC dictated the race from early on, putting faith in his race plan, he pulled East Down's Oliver Robinson along with him. This pairing have met multiple times before and it was a sharp injection of pace that took Oliver out in front and led to an extraordinary finishing tunnel finish completing the 2000m in 7.30 and Ethan took second place in 7.35. Jacob Crawford of East Down AC came third. The Year 11 girls held their own within the mixed pack and Dromore ACs Amy McCartan cruised to victory in 9.33 followed shortly behind by Newcastle's Sophie Neill. The battle for third was won by teammate Ellen Watson.



Race strategies in play between East Downs Oliver Robinson and Newcastle ACs Ethan McMullan

Newcastle AC would like to extend their thanks to Mc Grady Financial Services for their continued support of the event. Also, they would like to acknowledge the work of the coaches, club members and parent volunteers who made this event possible today, without them, this event would not go ahead. This year we have witnessed the emergence of many new athletes to the cross country scene and the progress of those who have already been embracing the muck. A thank you to all the clubs involved, Burren AC, Dromore AC, East Down AC and Murlough AC for their hard work and effort throughout the year to nurture the young talent that has been on display throughout the series. Next year we hope that we will return to the five race format and have even more nail biting and exciting races to look forward to.