

Newcastle Juniors make light work of a “Spicy” route in Tollymore

Race Report by Siobhan Grant

On Sunday, the club hosted the 4th race of the McGrady's Financial Junior Cross Country Series. The weather was onside and even the sun came out from time to time to remind us that Spring was incoming. With all the Junior coaches undertaking various roles across the event, some for the first time and other, experienced stalwarts directing, the teamwork was evident and reflected on the smooth running of the event.

With this being the second race in the series hosted in Tollymore, gave freedom for course designer extraordinaire Phil Hodge to let his imagination run wild and with his new route marking flags. Using the pre-mowed lines to create what he coined a “spicy route” and even declared it would be run the opposite direction to really mix it up. For those set in their ways with the need to always run anticlockwise, it took some adjustment but added to the day.

Under the experienced eye of Catherine McInotsh, every coach was delegated jobs and instructions given. Welcoming Frank Morgan on stopwatch and soon figuring out Siobhan Grant didn't need a loudspeaker to be heard, the races got underway as spectators lined the route at all points to cheer everyone on.

The P4 and Under races were the only separate Boy/Girl races. The P4 boys race kicked off the day's proceedings. Mark McDonald enjoyed the addition of the hill and was able to show off his hill technique to complete the route in 3.34 to cheers and applause from the spectators.

The P4 and Under girls were confident on the startline that they were better than the boys before them and shared what treats they had planned for after. Obviously I am not the only parent who encourages participation by promises of sweets and ice cream after a job well done. Ciona McAleenan stormed around the course showing that you can take the girl out of the Liatroim Hills but you can't take the Liatroim Hills out of the girl, to finish first in 2.19. Not too far behind, Sophie Kerr crossed the line in 3rd place after ensuring she couldn't be caught by her little sister behind her. Rua Gosling showed some flawless hill running skills as she approached the finish and had plenty of smiles as she finished in 2.38. Meabh Flynn also found that little something special as she tackled the final hill, showing signs of a future Hill and Daler in years to come as she completed the race in 3.52. Closing out the first category of the day was the now 4 year old, Charlotte Kerr, after building on her parkrun performance in recent weeks, Charlotte ran her own race engulfed at either side by her personal support crew of sister and friends to finish in 4.08.



Cliona McAleenan smiling on the way to first place in P4 and Under race.

The P5 race started at the opposite end of the course and got off to a fast start with Harry McVeigh stretching his legs casually over the 800m after his phenomenal outing on Friday at Mallusk. Racing against his peers, it was clear he was cut from a different piece of cloth as he crossed the line in 3 minutes dead. Though not to be outshone, the battle behind Harry with best friend Rossa McAleenan and East Downs Mack Canavan proved to be one of the notable moments of the day. Phils sweeping final hill played host to many battles throughout the day and on this occasion, Rossa was pipped to the post. Though there has been word that a young boy has been spotted out running the roads in the countryside and this dedication and attitude to training will pay off dividends in the coming months. Keep up the good work Rossa. Cuan McMurray showed resilience and determination in his hunt for the finish line as he engaged his inner hill runner for a flying feet finish. Nearly missing the start, Elizabeth Houston was the only Newcastle girl in the P5 girls race and held her own to take second place and make her mark as a strong runner to beat.



Cuan McMurray looking strong during P5 race

With the distance moving to 1000m for the P6 group, it was Rory Quinn who was the first P6 across the line. Rory is new to the series this year and is learning with every race how to best use his energy throughout the race. Proving at Tollymore that he has a better handle on things as the series progresses. The mixed race allowed Newcastle's Emily Kerr to push herself against the boys again continuing her personal battle or some might say vendetta against club mate Senan Gosling who still refuses to give her an inch with Senan crossing the line in 4.28 and Emily in 4.30. Luke McDonald also demonstrated his future Hill and Dale potential in the closing stages as he powered up the hill with determination and drive.

The P7 race was entertaining as always. With a large mixture of the participating clubs on the start line the mood was light but the fear of tackling that hill twice was clearly playing on their minds. However the Newcastle AC runners feared no hill after Monday night's session at club training on hill techniques and being able to push on even when legs were tired. No stranger to training on hills, Connaire Og McVeigh was the first Newcastle runner to cross the line after a battle with Jack King to come third. He was shortly followed by Saorlaith McAleenan who was genuinely excited by the addition of "that hill" not once but twice. This was clear as she soared up the hill and made light work of the undulation presented to her around the route to take 1st girl. Mary Houston and Lily McMurray continued their battle from previous races in this series and demonstrated flawless hill technique as they approached the finish. Newcastle welcomed Emer Quinn to the line up, with a busy calendar with many other commitments she finally toed the line and ran a strong race in 6.05. A brilliant first outing for the club. Aoife Grant continued her quest for smile of the series as she floated around the course, though the smile was set aside as she hunted down club mate Turlough O'Hanlon in the closing stages and was just pipped to the post claiming she didn't want to take over him and make him feel bad. She clearly doesn't get the concept of racing.



Turlough O'Hanlon pushing hard to not be caught by club mate Aoife Grant

The Year 8 start line was missing a few familiar faces through injury but it also welcomed some new faces to the line up. It was a race led by the young ladies of the Year 8 line up. A very smart race from Maisie McVeigh, were she sat closely in the shadows of Murlough ACs Hermoine Sheridan for the majority of the race, her game plan played out in the closing stages as her faith in her own ability and the fact she does love a Hill or two, had her veer left on the approach to the finish and accelerate at blistering speed to make light work of the final hill to take 1st place with a 10 second cushion. Estelle Austin also had a notable race as she continues to show improvement across all disciplines in running. Her trips to the Mast have paid off dividends with regards her belief and developing technique. Niamh Watson, like Estelle, is growing in confidence and learning every week as she takes on the challenges of Ian Bailey's Mountain Monday group. The club missed out on regulars Fiachna McAleenan and Darragh Kerr though this left way to welcome Sebastian McCaughey to his first race for the club. A strong start for Seb demonstrated the talent that he has to offer, as an avid participant at Parkrun he needs to develop his experience within the shorter distances to manage his race strategies more effectively. An amazing first run for the club. He was soon followed by Fionn McEvoy who has clearly become more comfortable within this series and the distance that is asked of him, completing the route in 7.31. You'd have thought that Rónán Grant had won the race as he dug deep up that final hill and put in a powerful finish, he was met with rapturous applause as he continues to improve race on race and shows unwavering dedication to his running.



Maisie McVeigh in full acceleration mode uphill

The Year 9 boys knew toeing the line that they'd finish in the top 3, given that there was only 3 of them starting. Aaron O Boyle was a class above the rest as he cruised around the course and put on a flawless display of how to run Cross Country like a professional and demonstrated clearly why he is in the All Ireland Schools Final.



Aaron OBoyle give a masterclass in cross country running

Jamie O'Flaherty was neck and neck the whole way round with Lorcán Rowntree and fought hard right to the end, only missing out on 2nd place by 3 seconds.

Piera Corrigan was the only Year 9 running for the club, after a hasty phone call from Lynda wondering were we running late and could Erin make the start line. Piera, the personification of pose and control through the route, found her stride early on and pushed over the 1600 for a run she should be proud of.

The Year 10 race welcomed Emily McMullan to the startline, the only McMullan to toe the line on the day which she clearly pointed out. Starting on the hill, it wasn't going to be an easy start. Though Mountain Mondays have been paying off within Emily's training schedule she ran a controlled race and didn't falter on the hills.



Emily McMullan working the field in the Year 10 race

The Year 11+ race didn't disappoint either. With 3 laps to be completed on the route. Yasin Brannagan put in a fierce fight the whole way around as he clung onto East Downs Oliver Robinson. He left nothing out there on the route, finishing in 8.51. The final highlight of the day was a testament to dedication, resilience and finding that place deep inside where you know you've something extra special to offer. Sophie Neill had a dream race, matching Dromores Amy McCartan, stride for stride throughout the first 2.5 laps. Mumbling from the monument knew it was a case of who would kick first and hold onto the lead. Sophie had full control of her form and like those who had run before her, had plenty of hill experience to add to her card. Using this, Sophie kicked with 200m to go and Amy couldn't hold on and Sophie glided over the finish line to take the win.

An exceptional turn out from all our athletes and also from our coaches and parents to make hosting the event run smoothly from set up to clean up and all in between. The club would like to thank our local clubs for coming along and taking part in the event and we look forward to Sunday 26th March where we hope that our young athletes will travel to Rostrevor for the final race of the series, there is still so much that can change on the leaderboards at this late stage, so don't miss out.