

# Newcastle Juniors take on Tollymore

## *Race Report by Siobhan Grant*

As January nears its end, the McGrady Financial Services Junior Cross Country Series is kicking off again.

On Sunday the young runners toed the line at Tollymore as Murlough AC hosted the 2nd race of the series.

Although the sky would have deceived you into thinking that it was a lovely day, the head wind that greeted runners and spectators as they approached the monument in Tollymore was definitely trying to make itself known adding an extra obstacle for the Junior runners of the local five athletics clubs, Burren AC, Dromore AC East Down AC, Murlough AC and Newcastle AC.

First up the most popular race of every McGrady's meet was the P4 and Under race. A race which for many of the older juniors was their first ever racing experience. With runners as young as 3 standing on the line smiling and waving at their friends and families it is always a fantastic category to kick the day off.

The boys took on 1 lap of the top course with Harry Flynn giving his all to finish strongly over the final 50m he was soon followed by teammate Mark McDonald who gave every ounce of energy he had in ensuring he finished strong and with a smile.

As for the girls, Cliona McAleenan took off with gusto and although chased the whole way around held onto the lead and took the first of 4 podium places for the McAleenans. Behind Cliona was Meabh Flynn who's confidence has grown tenfold over the past year and was adamant to not let Cliona get too far ahead of her. A superb run and definitely one to watch. Sophie Kerr proved that those Saturday Parkruns are helping improve her resilience as she soared up through the pack.

Taking every single spectator with her, was Sophie's little sister Charlotte Kerr who was the personification of skill, determination and happiness as she took the race to a close at the young age of 3.

From the outset, the P5 boys race was already touted before they even lined up, as a race young Harry McVeigh would win. Never really coming out of first gear he cruised around the 600m course to take his second win of the series. However he may watch his back as his best friend Rossa McAleenan has been training hard alongside him and making huge progress. He put in a solid run to take a convincing 2nd place. Cuan McIlmurray worked his way through the field to attack the final hill with all his might to finish strong.

The P5 girls race was a tight fought battle with our own Elizabeth Houston making an early break for the finish and even though 2nd place held on, her resolve was too strong and in the final 50m her strength and determination gave her a few metres grace and took the win.

The P6 boys race welcomed Rory Quinn back for his 2nd race for Newcastle learning from his first race, he ran a steady race and dug in deep at the end to power up the final hill for 3rd place. Luke McDonald showed style and dedication as he gave everything from start to finish.

Spectators were treated to a masterclass in Cross Country running as the P6 girls race took off. Leading from the front, the natural ability and grace of Emily Kerr glided around the route completely in control of each stride with magnificent form to take 1st place again in this category. Isla McMullan had a far from ideal race however was supported by not only her big sister Emily, but

by a fellow runner from Murlough who sacrificed her race to support Isla. A true testament to the inclusiveness and importance of a high level respect within the sport.

Always a popular category, the P7 category didn't fail to disappoint. Many of these runners have stood shoulder to shoulder with each other in past few weeks at Flavahans XC and they know each others games well.

The boys race saw Connaire Og McVeigh demonstrate endless resilience as he pushed hard at the end to miss out on 3rd place. The P7 girls race was treated to an on form performance from Saorlaith McAleenan as she ran away with the win. With a noteworthy performance at Delamont last week, she continued forward at pace, taking no prisoners and cementing her intentions to win the series. She was chased relentlessly by Mary Houston and Lily McIlmurray who on this occasion couldn't close the gap, however their navigation of the field and finding that little extra when it was needed was a joy to watch. Aoife Grant has become too fond of social parkruns and felt that this was the perfect occasion for a catch up on the craic with the rest of the field. Chatting aside she finish in 6th and I'm sure with another new friend to add to the collection.

As we moved into the Post Primary section of the day the Year 8 boys race was dominated by the eldest of the McAleenan Clan, Fiachna. Not only had he to follow in the footsteps of his 3 young siblings, he also had to put to bed an incident at Districts and focus on the raw talent that he has and needs to have faith in.

It didn't take much for him to unlock his potential as he soon had read the field and knew he had the upper hand within 300m. He lead the whole way, unchallenged and I hope has put to bed any worries. At the other end of the field, Rónán Grant ran well yet it has to be noted that every race this young man rocks up to, he knows he isn't going to challenge the front runners but demonstrates to everyone there that as long as you're moving forward at your own pace, you're achieving the same as everyone else. He embodies the clubs ethos of inclusion, equality and dedication, a great example to all our Juniors.

In the Year 8 girls race. Newcastle had 3 young ladies. Maisie McVeigh, Niamh Watson and Estelle Austin. Always a highly competitive category and this particular group of young ladies over the years have proven to be quite heavy handed on course.

Maisie who is currently focusing her training towards the Ulster Schools Cross Country Championships next month, took 3rd place on Sunday with probably one of her more controlled runs and adding to her experience of battling for place within the lead group which will pay dividends in Mallusk. Niamh Watson also demonstrated the fruits of training hard and impeccable form helped her throughout.

Estelle Austin, who is new to the McGrady's line up, not only ran a hard race, but done so with a smile on her face the whole time. We do say the most important thing is to enjoy it and finishing the race she claimed she will definitely return to the series again.

Our Year 9 runners toed the line and were ready to give some of the best performances of the day.

Aaron O'Boyle went out fast and quickly established a good lead on team mate Jamie O'Flaherty. In the second lap Aaron was unstoppable and had an emphatic win with Jamie losing out by a few strides to take third place.

In the girls, Erin put her nerves aside and reminded herself that her race experience and dedication in training would stand by her regardless of who she lined up against. A sensible and well judged run

secured the top of the podium. Piera Corrigan also had a strong race with Clara Flynn bringing it home for the Year 9 girls fully in control of her race from start to finish.

Sophie Neill has continued to excel this season at cross country and push herself when it is needed most, threatening other runners with her smart race tactics, taking the psychological advantage and capitalising on it. A brilliant example to our younger juniors.

Yasin Brannigan had a great race, he sat nicely on the shoulder of the 2 EDAC boys throughout the race and didn't budge from there. This ensured that his competition was pushed all the way to the end of the funnel.

The "bigger boys" brought along solid runs, both looking strong and deploying flawless race strategies. Euan McIntosh looked really strong and comfortable throughout, followed across the line by Karim Jaidine, who was fresh from an 11th place finish at Born to Run 5k in Antrim the day before, shortly behind him.

There isn't much time to allow the dirt to dry and fall off the spikes as the 3rd race of the series will take place this Sunday in Delamont. After the display from all athletes this weekend, Delamont is shaping up to be a one not to miss.



*Karim finishes 11th at Born to Run 5k even at Antrim Castle*



*A 1st and 2nd for best friends Harry Mc Veigh and Rossa McAleenan*



*Fiachna McAleenan in control of the Year 8 race*



*Lily McIlmurray comes over the hill on lap 1*



*A masterclass in Cross Country delivered by P6 Emily Kerr*