

Plenty of smiles over the miles at Tollymore

Race Report by Siobhan Grant

The penultimate race of the McGrady Financial Services Cross Country Series, took place on Sunday under ominous skies in Tollymore. There was talk of snow and the requirement for hot water bottles prior to the event, however the weather held and aside from a sprinkling of rain during the senior races, spectators and runners alike were treated to a mild spring Sunday afternoon as Newcastle AC hosted race 4 of 5.

This year's course can only be described as 'spicy.' Utilising the pre-mowed track around the Monument, Phil Hodge can take the kudos for that sweeping back hill to the finish. The 800m clockwise loop offered a cross country course to rival those of old with twists and turns as well as plenty of undulation peppered throughout. Each and every participant was challenged by the final stretch to the finish and clearly it will be a course to go down in history and maybe repeated again next year

With Siobhan Grant making her debut as Race Announcer and Start Line moderator, her need for things to run swiftly and promptly to ensure that she could get back over the hill to Moneyscalp at the height of lambing season ensured that come 1pm, the P4 and Under race was lining up and without a hiccup, each race followed quickly and efficiently one after the other.

With race numbers not as many as previous races, this allowed for all races from P5 upwards to become mixed races. This opened the field of each race to new riverlies to be developed and more people to chase down.

The P4 and Under boys race was the largest race of the day with 12 participants covering the 500m. It was Murlough AC who filled the podium with Cahal Cunningham first, 2.13, followed by Conor Gallagher and Ciaran Murray in joint second crossing the line neck in neck in 2.14. The P4 and Under girls saw Newcastle ACs Cliona McAleenan return to racing to lead the pack over the line in 2.19. She was swiftly followed by East Downs Fiadh Kellett in second, 2.24 and Newcastle's Sophie Kerr in third, 2.29.



Ben Boyd showing determination in the P4 and Under race

The P5 race was the beginning of the mixed race affair and produced some outstanding battles Harry McVeigh, Newcastle AC, continued his flawless run of top of the podium finishes in this series, crossing the line in 3 minutes for 800m. He was joined by Mack Canavan, East Down AC, next over the line after a nail biting final 100m as he battled it out with Newcastle's Rossa McAleenan who took 3rd in 3.10.

Not far behind the lead boys was Aoife Maguire taking the win for Murlough AC in 3.43. Elizabeth Houston for Newcastle AC was second in 3.51 and Aoibhinn Kelly, Murlough AC was third in 4.05

Harry King led the assault in the P6 boys category completing the gruelling 1000m race in 4.16. Newcastle AC Rory Quinn came 2nd in 4.26 and the P6 podium was completed by Senan Gosling in 4.28 who seemingly continues to be hunted down by club mate Emily Kerr who won the girls race in 4.30. It was too close to call for 2nd place with both Sophie Branagan, Burren AC and Ayla Boyd Murlough AC coming joint second in 4.54.



P6 girls searching for that extra something to get over the final hill

The P7 race was the only race which had representatives from all 5 clubs taking part across the mixed line up. It was Dromores Brodie Hill, fresh off the back of an amazing run at Mallusk on Friday who won the boys race in 5.54. He was in front of a tussle for second place between Murlough's, Jack King and Newcastle's, Connaire Og McVeigh who came 2nd and 3rd respectively in 5.40 and 5.06. The next across the line was the P7 girls winner, Newcastle ACs Saorlaith McAleenan who continues to assert her dominance in this category winning by 34s in 5.16. She headed a full Newcastle AC podium with Mary Houston and Lily McMurray coming in 2nd and 3rd in 5.50 and 5.59.



Brody Hull, Dromore AC, leading the P7 race

In the Year 8 race it was the girls who would reign supreme and take the overall win. A flawlessly executed race plan from Newcastle ACs Maisie McVeigh had her bolt out of the shadows of Murlough AC Hermione Sheridan on the final hill to make light work of the incline for a 10 second advantage over 2nd place in 5.58. Murlough ACs, Saoirse Maguire wasn't too far behind as the girls podium was completed before the boys crossed the line in 6.15. The East Down Year 8 boys filled the podium with only 3 seconds separating the 3 boys. Jarlath Kearney, Luke Napier and David Morrissey finished 1,2,3 after 6 minutes and 24 seconds.



The girls leading the boys in the Year 8 race

The Year 9 boys were certain they were all going to be on the podium as only 3 of them toed the line on the day. Aaron O'Boyle, Newcastle AC ran a superbly paced run and was untouchable from early on in the race. Completing the 1600 course in 5.46. The battle behind him continued throughout the race as Burren ACs Lorcán Rowntree and Newcastle ACs Jamie O'Flaherty fought to the bitter end with Lorcán just finding that little extra in the final few metres to take 2nd place in 6.14 and Jamie 3rd in 6.17.

The Year 10 participants stood on the start line knowing they would have to tackle that hill right in front of them not once, not twice but three times. It was the East Down runners who dominated the top places in this race With Thomas Magee and Eoin Rooney coming 1st and 2nd in 7.02 and 7.17. Cara Napier and Sarah Gilchrist came second and third in the girls category in 7.47 and 7.55. Emma Stewart from Dromore AC was outstanding and secured 1st place with a cushion of 14 seconds in 7.33.

The Year 11 and over race had to take on 3 full loops of the course to complete the 2400m. East Down ACs Oliver Robinson was first up the finishing hill in 8.42 shortly followed by Newcastle ACs Yasin Branagan in 8.51 with both boys congratulating each other on the finish line for a job well done. Joshua Martin, Dromore AC, who is the baby within this age category ran a solid race to take 3rd in 10.40.



East Downs Oliver Robinson show class and style in the Year 11 and over event

The Year 11 and over girls race was the highlight of the day. A true battle of who had the nerve to break free and the faith in their ability to push right to the end. The ongoing battle between Dromores Amy Mc Cartan and Newcastle's Sophie Neill has been a talking point of this series. On Sunday spectators watched as for 2 laps the 2 girls sat side by side, matching each other with every stride, yet half way into the final lap it was Sophie who kicked and capitalised on her momentum to cruise to 1st place in 11.37. Amy came second in 11.52. Rebeckah Wilson completed the podium in 12.23.



Sophie Neill and Amy Mc Cartan battle it out in the Year 11 and over race

The final race will be hosted by Burren AC in Rostrevor on 26th March at 1pm. We hope that the incoming cold weather doesn't hang about too long and gives way to a bright and sunny end to the Series.