

Race Report from 2014 KHVIII Relay.



King Henry VIII School hosted over 400 runners in their annual Relay Race on 5th February, with boys and girls from over 60 schools across England. The race has a strong legacy, boasting former competitors of the calibre of Seb Coe, Alistair & Jonathan Brownlee, and Richard Nerurkar.

In high winds we set up the course as best we could, having to tie the tape to objects and allow it to wave, banner-like, rather than spanning it between posts as usual! Record-breaking rainfall over the UK had not missed Coventry, and the woods section particularly had some impressively deep and wide puddles to ford. However the course overall was less muddy than in 2013, and fears of a slow course seemed to have been misplaced. The rain continued to fall all morning, as schools from as far afield as Kent, North Yorkshire and even the flood-hit Somerset all made their journeys to the War Memorial Park, where the event is held. It was fortunate that the rain stopped just as the race began, allowing the spectators and waiting competitors to watch in greater comfort.

In the Boys' Race Emile Caires of Bradford Grammar School led the pack at the end of the first of six legs, running the 2.3 mile course in 11:54. A fine run by Mark Pearce – the third-fastest of the day – took St Albans from 15th place to first place. As the front runner, and established a commanding lead, setting up their team's eventual victory. Miles Weatherspeed from The Judd school had the best third lap time, briefly overtaking St Albans, but in the fourth lap Robbie Lighttower took them back to the front, and St Albans and The Judd then maintained their first and second places for the remainder of the race. The third place cup was still in contention, and Rory Fraser of Shrewsbury had a last lap push that over took Loughborough. It is noteworthy that The Judd did not have a single runner in the top ten fastest lap, but all their runners made good laps and all within 35 seconds of each other – such excellent consistency.

The outstanding individual performance of the day in the Boys' Race came from Alex George, of Marling School, whose alma mater also nurtured the talents of the Brownlee brothers and Tom Purnell (who has the fastest lap time since the course changed in 1991). Alex is a member of the Great Britain Cross Country U20 squad, and is ranked 3rd in the UK for U20. He was the fastest lap runner, lifting his team from 29th to 19th. His time, 11min 24sec, was exceptional.

King Henry's fielded one team this year, comprising Harrison McCartney, Ed Broadberry, Ollie Hopley, Reece Quinn, Rob Bernhardt and Stefan Hill. They finished 39th, in a time of 90:21. As a relatively young team, they give us great hope for next year. Bablake School was the only other local boys' team, competing for the first time since 1995. They finished 43rd out of a total of 48 teams who completed the course.

St Albans won The King Henry VIII Relay Cup for an incredible eleventh time, with an overall time of 74:38; The Judd were second with 75:33, and Shrewsbury placed third with 76:10.

The Girls' Race (four runners each on the same course) had 32 teams. Olivia Gwynn took Millfield School into the lead in the first lap, running the third best time of the race in 13:58, but an amazing second lap run from defending champions, Loreto's Harriet Knowles-Jones took them into the lead. Harriet's run of 12:42 is a new course record, by a 15 year old who already represents GB in the U20 team. Marshals and spectators witnessed her 'powering' around the course and 'flying' over the mud! The Loreto team could not hold onto this position however, and Millfield's strong team (all runners making it into the top ten fastest times) went on to win the King Henry VIII Girls' Relay Cup with a new all-time fastest team time for the race – another record broken on the day! So a win for Millfield in 56:18, Loreto Grammar School were second with 57:39 (the same time for them as in 2013), and the third place cup went to Sevenoaks School, who ran the course in 60:32.

King Henry VIII fielded three teams, and our 'A' team comprising Penny Oliver, Charlotte Cleasby, Rachael Abbey and Aimee Morse came in 21st place. Running in our other teams were Rhiannon Cope, Rebekah Ramsay, Beth Gardiner, Louisa Wooley, Alex Flinn-Shepherd, Chloe Jenkins, Eve Barnes and Ella Rose McCartney. From Coventry we also welcomed Bablake (26th), and Tile Hill Wood (28th), 2008 winners, alongside our 'B' and 'C' teams. These results perhaps serve to underline the national reach of this race, and the incredible talent that is seen each year at the War Memorial Park.

Twice GB Olympian Dave Long presented the prizes this year. He spoke of the memories created by running in races such as this, and encouraged the runners to enjoy the sport, and to cherish the relationships formed in their teams. Despite the rain there was a fantastic atmosphere, as parents and coaches from all over the country descended on the park. Dave Butler, commentating for the event, did a great job of keeping everybody up to speed with the goings on. A number of parents had emailed the school beforehand to say that they were looking forward to watching their children run in the race, as they had run it themselves as young athletes. With 43 years of history, perhaps this generational participation shouldn't come as a surprise! Thanks to all those who spectated, and especially to the students from all years, and the staff (past and present!) who helped in the smooth running of the day. Thanks also to the War Memorial Park for the continued use of their park for the race.

The date of the next year's race is Wednesday 4th February 2015.

Tom Andrews, February 2014.