

## The Inter-Counties Fell Running Championships at Witton Park, Blackburn

– *Fell-running, but not as we know it!!*

It hardly seems possible that it was only a week ago, on Sun 18 May, that we were baking in the heat and desperate for water and shade after a short fell race in Blackburn! Resplendent in the fetching yellow vests of the NE Counties, the ‘finest’ fell runners that the county could offer cast a wary eye around the park that resembled a fairground on a summer’s day, with the competitors looking mostly about the correct age to enjoy the merry-go-round and ice creams!



Fairground

When I was selected for the (first ever) NE ladies team, I realised that this wouldn't be an easy race. After all you don't usually find mass fields or fun runners at races of this standard! I had a vague memory of doing the Northern Cross-country Champs at Witton Park 'back in the day'. The race details had done little to suggest anything other than a cross-country race, implying that the course would suit novice fell runners, which seemed a bizarre comment for such an event. It also said that the entire route would be marked and marshalled. I wasn't after an orienteering event, but again this made me think 'cross-country' rather than 'fell'! All kit requirements were also waived due to such fine weather.

As we waited for our Team Manager, Dave Moir from Tyne Bridge Harriers, acting in Will's absence, to register us all, even though we were already registered (!?!), it became evident that there were some considerably younger competitors than us! How I'd forgotten that it was, of course, a Senior Championship I do not know! I had thought about them being fast but had forgotten that they'd be twenty-something and wearing cropped tops! Fantastic! Never mind, Karen and I plaited our hair with our yellow bobbles, Emma said we

looked great, but her vest didn't fit and could she cut the sides and Sarah (Lister from Blackhill Bounders) didn't fancy running at all!



Team photo

We had time for a quick look at the course which started on a grassed area in the middle of the park, headed round a tree and into the woods. Immediately the path climbed slowly and steadily to some stairs which we would return to and start the second lap from. It was a clockwise loop and as we jogged through the woods, we couldn't believe how dry the ground was. There wasn't time to go all the way round but we knew the route got steeper as it got further into the woods and that there was a complete loop of the woods at the top which re-joined the main loop and came back to the top of the stairs, ready for lap two, without an extra loop of the woods.

The ladies' race was before the men's, so a small, quality field gathered at the starting pen and our numbers were ticked off. We took our place on the start line, rubbing shoulders with the likes of Emma Clayton and Victoria Wilkinson – that was close as we'd get to them for a while!! I wasn't looking forward to the start as the grass was long and my legs aren't, but it wasn't as bad as I'd anticipated!!



And we're off !!

We went into the woods as a group, but as the gradient kicked in so did the 'young legs' and the majority of the field seemed to move with ease up, up and away! The first 2.5 km was up hill and the gradient gradually took its toll with the steepest sections seeming to coincide with the unshaded areas of the woods! However the race played out at the front, I have no idea, but I spent most of the time running on my own, occasionally catching a lady who was struggling slightly more than me on the surprisingly testing twists and climbs. The thought of going back round the loop and completing the first long lap was not particularly attractive, but like many of these things, the pain was temporary! The marshals were very encouraging and the course was well marked throughout.

Due to the arrival of the fairground, the return route had been altered rather unpleasantly to go through some cow fields which were rutted, had a cruel hill and still had the cows in them! I felt that I was running strongly even though I was nowhere in the race and moved onto the second lap still moving at a reasonable pace and able to run up most of the climb, apart from those sunny bits. There were a few awkward stairs, twists, gates and tree roots to contend with, but having been around once already, there were no surprises on the second lap. I even managed to catch some more runners and get the occasional glimpse of Sarah! We returned across the long grass to the finish, passing by most of Blackburn who had come out to play frisbee, football, walk their dogs etc on such an unusually sunny day.

The ladies in yellow ran well with Karen first home for the NE team, followed by Emma, Sarah and then me, one place behind. In such a high quality field, we were only 10<sup>th</sup> team out of 11, but age group-wise Karen was 2<sup>nd</sup> v45 with Emma 3<sup>rd</sup> and I was 3<sup>rd</sup> v40. So that proved that the young speedy people in cropped tops were faster than the old lasses in yellow! Fancy that!

We passed on our 'tips for the top' to the men, particularly the effect of the heat which was intense and as they had an extra lap to do, would be more prolonged for them. David Beech set off quickest for the NE men's team and managed to hold on to 50<sup>th</sup> place and 2<sup>nd</sup> counter. John Butters paced his race more evenly and moved through the field,

finishing 1<sup>st</sup> for the NE in 40<sup>th</sup> position overall, which was excellent in such a good quality event. Dave Moir, our Team Manager, was the third counter for the NE.



David Beech



John Butters

It was a good day - lovely weather, not much like a fell race, but still fun and a privilege to run for the NE Counties. And an added bonus was that Karen and I were crowned as unofficial NE Speed Talking Champions by Dave who had the pleasure (I think that's what he said!) of sitting between us on the journey!! Happy Days!!



Happy Days!

**Steph Scott**