

Runnymede Relays – Saturday 7th July 2018

Despite an unforeseen clash with an England world cup football game, six teams of six Reading Roadrunners made the journey to Windsor Great Park, for an afternoon of running in blistering sunshine. For those who haven't participated in this event before, you must! Runners of legs A, C and E in each team complete a 5.25 mile loop, while for runners B, D and F, it's 2.75 miles. It's mostly on grass, with some undulations, and the occasional glimpse of Windsor Castle and the Copper Horse.



With our A team finishing third and second in the past two years, there was only one way to go, and men's captain Phil Reay, still basking in the glory of an A team win in the recent Ridgeway Relay, put together a team with a definite job to do. This time there was an actual baton, and there are strict instructions that it must be carried in the hand, and not tucked into shorts or anything else.

The official results are missing some details, but I'll do my best to give a flavour of the race.

Leading out the A team was Matt Richards. Matt lives in London so we don't see him down at the track in Palmer Park, but when he does make an appearance alongside other RRs, he does us proud. True to form, he was first back on leg 1, in an impressive time of 30:02, which was 56 seconds ahead of the Datchet Dashers team in second. I was out on leg 1 myself when Matt returned, but I heard he had to be bucketed down like a racehorse when he crossed the line. It was warm out there!



In spite of an excellent time of 16:19, and having overtaken a number of leg 1 runners, including me, Pete Jewell was unable to hold off Datchet, and finished his leg in second place. The gap was now 24 seconds, in Datchet's favour, but the A team was still very much in the game.

By the time I arrived back from leg 1, the A team's leg 3 runner, David McCoy, the younger, had already left. Another excellent performance saw him return in 32 minutes dead, with the gap behind first now 41 seconds. A glance at the runners lined up for the remaining Datchet legs meant that there was no need to panic. Phil knew there was strength throughout the team, with the best yet to come.

Andrew Smith was up next, against one of the opponents' fastest runners, and Andrew's 16:40 leg was not enough to prevent the gap from widening further to 1 min 27. This just goes to show the calibre at the front end of the race; the average short leg time for the rest of our teams was around 25 minutes.

As leg 5 began, it was time to get out the biggest of the big guns, and Andrew handed over the baton to Rob Corney. In a style that we have come to expect, Rob recorded the fastest long leg time of the day, and was back in 29:07. His Datchet counterpart was over a minute slower, so, with one leg to go, the gap between the two leading teams was now reduced to 14 seconds.

What an exciting finish it was to be! Lance Nortcliff, not long having returned to racing, was tasked with bringing the team back up to first place. I think it's fair to say he was nervous, although believed that, on paper, he was a faster runner than that he would be facing, or indeed, chasing.



The layout of the course is such that, you can see each runner disappear up the hill, and then it's a bit of a wait until they reappear on the other side of the park, before they turn for a long sprint finish. It's then that we start to squint into the distance, and speculate. 'Is that a green vest?' 'Was he wearing a cap?' 'That looks like his running style', and so on.

Imagine our delight on realising that Lance had pulled it out of the bag, and with an incredible 15:46 leg, one of the fastest runs of the day, had brought the team back up to first, with Datchet Dashers following 50 seconds later. Well done, Lance, and well done, the A team, each of them winning a silver plate, complete with stand, to be displayed on the mantelpiece, or put in a carrier bag under the bed.



The A team may have been done and dusted in 2 hours 20, but the rest of our teams still had a way to go, with the second team, of Ben Whalley, Helen Pool, Gemma Buley, Sarah Dooley, Dean Allaway and Ian Giggs recorded some really competitive times, and finished within their target of under 3 hours, in 15th place.

Missing times throughout the teams means that the positions of the remaining teams are unclear. However, there were some real standout performances, which are worthy of a mention. Chris Buley ran a very strong long leg, in 37:23, and showed that he is definitely one to watch. Donna Saunders continued her post-baby comeback with a cracking short leg. Chris Manton had come to spectate, having pulled out of the event with an injury. Finding ourselves a person short, though, and given the event's rule that runners may only one run leg, and for only one team, Chris was willing to don Clive Bate's already worn sweaty vest (a big ask, and I'm sorry my spare vest did not fit!), and jog round a short leg, just so that the team would be complete. While I would not recommend people should run if they are injured, we were all very grateful to Chris for this gesture. He is now resting up, ready for Snowdon this weekend. Note to spectators, always bring your kit; you never know.

Similarly, Phil Reay had been listed as a 'last resort' reserve, as his legs (and feet – I warn you, do not look!), were still very much in recovery from their various 100-mile exploits in recent months. In the absence of other reserves, Phil found himself drafted in by, erm, himself, to make up a team, and then went out again to bring back a lone runner.



That's the thing with team events, it really is a case of all being in it together. When Pete Morris was out on the course taking photos, he missed the 3.45 mass start, and David McCoy ran with him up the hill to try to catch the others. I'm just glad that Dean had Pete's phone number, or he could still have been out there, in the long grass.



Of course it was great to have a winning team among us, but the best thing about the afternoon, for me, is always the camaraderie, the chance to talk to people you don't always see, and the opportunity to share picnics. Now we know who buys those crackers in the shape of a Hovis loaf. The worst thing, apart from running in the heat (although I think it's still good training), was the mile of sand on the long leg. Whose idea was it to put that there?



I was delighted, as well, to welcome new member, Jennifer Holmes, to the club. We hope that you had a good afternoon out, and look forward to seeing you again. Spread the word about team events – the XC season will soon be upon us, and we have our eyes on some prizes!