

I share Murray's concern over the drop in numbers in this year's event, not only in the Senior/Veteran Men's event but in several of the younger age group races as well. I think that the conditions on the day may have had something to do with it on this occasion. A fair proportion of competitors from the local area enter on the day, and several may have been put off running by the freezing underfoot conditions. However the total of only 94 in the men's race was poor, especially when you consider that Manx Harriers supplied no fewer than 14 of them!

I also thought the decision to separate the U17 and U20 Women's races backfired badly. There were only 10 in the Under 17 race which was run on its own, and consequently wasn't much of a spectacle. I think they need to start these races together as in previous years to boost the numbers, even if they now run over different distances. I know Gemma Astin agrees with me on this.

There were some terrific performances from the Manx athletes. The Under 11s were fantastic, the girls missing out on medals by the narrowest of margins with 4th, 5th and 6th places out of a field of 36. If they had had a 4th team member finishing in the top half of the field they would have won the team gold medal – even with a 4th team member finishing last they would have won bronze. Well done Danielle, Katie and Josie! Conor Davies also ran extremely well to finish 13th out of 41 on his debut – despite launching into a sprint near what he thought was the finishing line, only to discover that he had another loop round the field still to do!

It was good to see Alice Ashe getting a good solid 9th place finish in the U13 Girls race after having to retire from last year's race with injury, and Sosie Cox acquitted herself very well on her Lancs debut to finish 18th.

Sammy Holt and Nick Colburn (Northern AC) both made their Lancs debuts in the U15 Boys race and will have gained valuable experience. Both finished in midfield placings. In the U15 Girls race, triple Lancs gold medallist Sarah Astin wasn't expected to be on the pace this year after long-term injury problems, but still showed her class with a 4th place finish on the back of a minimum of running over the last few months. I hope she is able to get back to full training soon. The ever-consistent Caitriona Cox produced a typically gutsy run to finish in a fine 13th place in her fourth successive Lancs.

The Under 17 Women's race produced the highlight of the day with a dominant display of front running from Gemma Astin giving her the gold medal by a big margin. She stamped her authority on the race right from the gun, and such was her lead by the first 'saucer' climb that she was able to exercise caution on the dangerous rutted ground on the descent. Her cause was helped by the absence of her two main rivals Annika Jarman and Kristie Leybourne, but that should take nothing away from yet another high-class performance by Gemma. She looks to be building up nicely towards the English National and Inter Counties Championships as well as the regional and national Schools events.

Also in the U17 Women's race was debutant Polly Rogerson who judged her race very well to finish 7th. Polly should have competed last year but managed to injure herself at home on the morning of the race!

It was good to see Sarah Curphey racing over the country for the first time this winter in the Senior Women's race, following injury and work commitments. She is always very consistent in this race and her 16th place finish was a good performance especially as she has not been able to train as much as in previous years.

In the Junior Men's race, Ben Lambden lined up for his first cross country race for many years and battled away gamely to complete the course (including 3 saucer climbs) despite suffering a pulled calf muscle mid-race.

We had 14 competitors in the Senior/Veteran Men's race, which I believe is the highest number we have ever had – certainly since 1999. In the early stages Keith Gerrard kept a watching brief on the shoulder of his two main rivals, but on the first descent through the horrendously rutted fields coming off the saucer he was unwilling to push as hard as they did. He was still within striking distance of the leaders on the 3rd lap, but backed off when he realised they were getting further away on this section every lap. Mindful of the more important races still to come this winter he was unwilling to risk a badly sprained ankle or worse, and who can blame him?

Behind him, I thought Kevin Loundes and Darren Gray produced the two best performances of the day from the Manx Harriers athletes alongside Gemma's gold medal. Kevin's improvement is relentless and he is now a very high-class athlete indeed. He gives 100% commitment from start to finish of every race he is in, and is tactically very smart too. He has a lot to look forward to in 2009. Darren has had a superb winter, and is now turning into the athlete he promised to be a few years ago. He had a difficult race in the sense that there was quite a big gap ahead of him with nobody to chase, but had a chasing pack behind him for much of the race. I wondered if he had pushed too hard in the first half of the race, but there were no worries there - his strength over the final two laps was mighty impressive, as was his sprint finish to edge out his Rossendale rival.

There was a fine debut by Martin Malone, and impressive performances in difficult conditions by all the athletes. I was pleased for Chris Quine, who has been using this race as his target for many months and is running as well now as he has done for a few years – despite shoelace problems! And a word for Robbie Lambden, who was nervous about the course beforehand, but finished inside an hour which was a really great effort. Robbie celebrated running for 59 minutes in sub-zero temperatures with a large ice lolly in the café afterwards!

Teamwise, we had our 6 counters all in the first 23 which on paper is possibly our best ever performance - however, Blackburn Harriers did even better with their 6 in the first 16! This perhaps says something about the lack of depth of quality in the race this year, but it was still a great performance from the Manx Harriers squad. Indeed, we had 11 athletes in the first 31.

Three medals were won in the Veteran's categories – Nigel Armstrong silver and Chris Quine bronze in the V40s and Andy Fox bronze in the V45s. Andy has won a medal in 9 of the 10 years since he became a Vet – the only missing year was the occasion he missed the race through illness! In a rather bizarre twist, Murray Lambden (V50) missed out on a medal despite beating Andy (V45) in the race. I also

see from the results that Manx Harriers won the Veteran's Team award – I am not sure whether medals were awarded for this. If so, the medal total is up to 7.

As always, we were made exceptionally welcome by everyone at Witton Park, and they really do appreciate the efforts we make to support the event in such numbers every year. I really enjoyed the day as always, and look forward to more success next year.