



Irwin Speirs XC Race Report December 9th 2023

The Mid Ulster Sports Arena in Cookstown was next up in the 2023 Athletics NI XC League, with St Peter's runners returning to a venue which was good to them last year, with the ladies lifting the Cup in 2022 on their way to being crowned League Champions and seeking to bring it back to Lurgan for another year. The men were seeking to build upon their recent strong performances with a good showing in Cookstown



"I think those conditions are as bad as we'll see all year" - the words uttered by many as we trudged through the muck after the Malcolm Cup in Comber just a few short weeks ago. How

wrong we were - up there with "I think we just clipped that iceberg Captain, but I'm sure it'll be grand"

Casting our minds back to December of last year, when we were treated to sub-zero conditions in the foothills of the Sperrins it is fair to say many would have preferred the biting cold to the conditions we were greeted with today; a quick walk around the course before racing had even started revealing the recent rain had turned the vast majority of the course to mud. I don't think I've seen anything as filthy as the time my wife went to bed early and I accidentally stumbled across Babestation while looking for National Geographic.

The conditions didn't put many people off though, as we had full contingents for both the senior ladies and gents and strong representation from the juniors. Even Conor 'Booter' Clarke made an appearance despite many fruitless attempts to avoid it, including calling the Mid Ulster Sports Arena on the Saturday morning to enquire about conditions - thankfully they lied and said they were great.

With folks accepting that the conditions were what they were and that there was little sympathy to be had and the gazebo putting up a brave fight against a strong wind - kudos to Daniel Harte on his debut for the Gazebo Gang - it was down to the business of the day

First up in the Black and White was young Tom O'Hagan in the Under 10s running a sensational race to come in second, hot on the heels of the winner. Not to be outdone, brother Sean showed his mettle in the Under 12s, putting in a great performance to finish just outside the top 10. Great stuff from the O'Hagan men, throwing down the gauntlet to mum and dad running later in the seniors



In the Under 14s and making his debut for St Peter's was Daniel Adams, putting in a great shift to complete the course in just under 7:00 and earning a well deserved 5th. Superb effort Daniel - long may it continue!



Completing the line up for the juniors was Cadence Hamilton running the Under 16s. Unfortunately Cadence ended up as the most recent addition to the St Peter's XC walking wounded, receiving a nasty kick early on which brought her run to a premature and undeserved end. While she was understandably disappointed, everyone at St Peter's - and indeed across the country - know how good Cadence is and there is no doubt she will be back and among the front runners in the not too distant future

With a strong showing across the junior races, the senior ladies took to the line to tackle 3 laps of the 1 mile course. The course was now very badly churned up with the mud literally 6 inches deep in many places - it was evident this was going to be a brutal race requiring people to dig deep and grind out performances

St Peter's were well represented with an 11-strong team comprising a great blend of runners carrying experience over from last year in Gillian McCrory, Patricia O'Hagan, Jourdain Baird, Beverly Balfour and Kate Mulholland, newcomers this year in Maeve Haughey, Laura Mulholland, Emma Greer and Lauren Beattie, debutant Emma Donnelly making her first appearance for the club and Eimar Nicholl donning the spikes once more for a discipline she claims to hate - she is not alone!

The ladies got a clean start up the 30m straight before swinging a hard left and hitting the infamous Cookstown hill and getting their first proper taste of the mud. The hill will be known to many from last year as a notorious leg-sapper, but today it was a different beast.

After cresting the hill, Gillian was nicely tucked in among the leading group with Kate and Patricia snapping on their heels and Jourdan running strong among the chasing pack. Full credit to the ladies in digging deep to hold their positions for the full 3 laps, with the mud really making this an incredibly difficult course on which to keep energy levels high.

With the ever-improving Tafelta AC having a very strong outing today and with 3 to score, it was a nail-biting finish with Gillian and Kate crossing the line with 2 Tafelta runners and Patricia putting in a super shift to split a pack of 3 Tafelta runners, pipping the 3rd Tafelta runner by 5 seconds. With both St Peter's and Tafelta finishing on 35 points, Patricia's run was crucial on the countback, helping St Peter's come out on top and ensuring the cup stays in Lurgan for another year

Completing the race and earning the team full participation points were Jourdan, Emma Donnelly, Emma Greer, Eimar, Maeve, Laura, Beverly and Lauren







With the cup in hand and the warm jackets on, the ladies now had the luxury of lining the course to ~~laugh at~~ cheer on the men as they apprehensively lined up for 4 laps of the course, knowing full well the ladies had once more set the standard and had well and truly removed the last remaining blades of grass from the route

Another great turnout from the men, with Christopher Sharkey for once having a race on his doorstep and not having to traipse halfway across the country, joined by John McManus, Deaglan O'Hagan, James Monaghan, Alan Ritchie, Booter Clarke, Paddy Conwell, Ethan Headley, Daniel Harte, debutant Donal McCarron and Mark Willis.

Deaglan O'Hagan carried a heavy burden and was more fearful than most, having watched his wife and children put in outstanding performances in the earlier races



From the off, James Monaghan surged ahead with strong running among the front runners, the Omagh man's class helping him run comfortably with the lead group and seeing him finish 5th overall on the day and first man home for St Peter's - another great performance in a very successful season to date for James.

Alan Ritchie put in a super shift, again making it look easier than it is, finishing 2nd for St Peter's on the day, with Mark Willis 10 places behind him and finishing 3rd for St Peter's. John McManus, only 30 seconds behind, picked up the final scoring position in 4th, with the former Dromore man proving to be a great addition to the club

Again, we benefited from a large turnout for the men, meaning we picked up maximum participation points with Deaglan O'Hagan, Ethan Headley, Booter Clarke, Daniel Harte, Donal McCarron, Christopher Sharkey and Paddy Conwell picking up the points

Special mention to the O'Hagan boys who picked a prime spot on the hill and roared on everyone in black and white, with special encouragement for daddy - "Come on - don't be afraid of the mud!!!"



A great days racing from everyone and thank you to all who came out in those conditions to run and support the teams

As we go into the remaining fixtures in the league, with both ladies and men well placed and the ladies seeking to defend their title, it is important that we can field a full team of 10 to score maximum points

Our next outing is likely to be the Mathieson Cup at Mallusk on Sunday 14th January. Hopefully we can look forward to another large turnout and more success for the club