

21st Green Belt Relay, 20-21 May 2017

Race Report

Peter Kennedy – Race Director

Summary:

This year's race saw the race sold out well before entries closed, with 46 teams entering and just one dropping out just before the race. This is 6 teams more than the previous highest entry, and leaves the race in good financial health and able to donate a significant surplus to the Princess Alice Hospice. This was a mix of running clubs and a few composite teams, and included 4 new entrants.

The format and timings of the race were as in previous years, with a slightly earlier start to stage 11. The course was almost the same as in previous years, with a small amendment (to make a road crossing easier) in stage 4, and a major amendment to stage 10 to avoid three fast road crossings while remaining in Epping Forest. The latter was a success; the new marshal points are much easier to get to, and although busy with traffic, are near junctions which means the traffic is much slower. Runners reported they liked it, especially the glorious views west from the top. Marking it requires a whole bag of sawdust just for the first mile, but it seems worth it.

The weather was cooler and wetter than in previous years, with heavy rain in the three days before and some heavy rain during the event, mainly during stage 5, which made conditions underfoot quite tough especially on the Essex Way section near the end of stage 10 (neatly described by one runner as a "mud traveller"). This didn't seem to really bother anyone and the atmosphere was fantastic.

The race was a success, with all teams completing the race and only a few relatively minor problems. Feedback to date on social media has been overwhelmingly positive.

Results and Prizes:

We saw some top-quality racing at the front with fierce competition between Serpentine and Thames Hare and Hounds in the men's race, and a stronger field of women's teams than in recent years too. We had 6 overall course records broken, and plenty of age-category records.

We introduced a new online results service which was a big success. This allows captains to register and correct all runners, and allows teams to keep up to date with the stage results and leaderboards, which adds to the buzz without needing the huge overhead of transporting printers and boards around the course (fun though those were). Congratulations to Allan Barrie for the technical wizardry as well as all the hard work in entering and correcting results.

Winners were as follows:

"The Green Belt" overall winners: Serpentine

2nd place: Thames Hare & Hounds

Women: Serpentine

Mixed: Thames Hare & Hounds

"Walking Stick" (Veterans): London Front Runners

"Toilet Seat": Pembroke Athletica

"Mark Critchlow" broken record (men): James McMullan

"Sonia O'Sullivan" broken record (women): Carla Molinaro

"Wissahickon Trophy" for most supportive club: awarded jointly to 26.2 RRC, Beckenham RC, BMF Bushy Park, British Airways AC, Burgess Hill Runners, Team Kirsty, Clapham Chasers, Clapham Runners, Dulwich Runners, Ealing Eagles, Elmbridge Road Runners, London Front Runners, Hampton Wick Wanderers, Havering 90 Joggers, Pembroke Athletica, Queen's Park Harriers, Ranelagh Harriers, Sandhurst Joggers, Serpentine RC, SMTC, The Stragglers, Stock Exchange AC, and Thames Hare & Hounds.

Burgess Hill will keep the old Wissahickon trophy (which is now full), although we intend to keep the award alive with multiple trophies.

We have awarded the Corporate Prize to British Airways in perpetuity.

We did a better job on distributing prizes by having a new women's plate. For next year we'd like to introduce trophies/shields/plates for the first two in each category, in addition to awarding the Green Belt for the overall winner (which is regardless of category). We will also get trophies for the Mountains team events, and distinct stage winner t-shirts for these stages (if possible in a polka-dot pattern).

Thanks to Pat and Alan Short for arranging the finish area barbecue and prizegiving, as well as the Hawker Centre staff, and thanks to Mike Mabin for sorting out the finish funnel and banner.

First aid and Marshalling:

We had two cars alternating between stage finishes, tracked by me on Viewranger, with equipped first-aiders provided by Event Medical Solutions. I can't stress enough how grateful I am to Asa, Elliot for the supremely professional job they do, and thanks to Kevin Walker of Burgess Hill and to Colin Jones of Stragglers for stepping in to drive them around the course. We had five incidents needing attention: two exhausted runners, one head cut from a low-hanging branch, one cut knee, and a bad ankle injury needing A&E care; the medics were on site more or less immediately for all of these and this system works well. I've also been asked to pass on my thanks to one of our runners who is a doctor and also stopped to assist an exhausted runner.

This is the first time that I've been in the role of checking all the marshalling stops. The system set up by Alan Pemberton over the past few years works really well, and we provided a bit more detail to teams about where to go, what to do and equipment needed, and provided spare "caution" boards and hi-vis vests where needed. All of the important road crossings and watering points were covered. Given the huge complexity of organising a team in this event, it is deeply impressive that the captains manage to meet these commitments.

Main comments are:

- The timings on stage 20 need amending because runners simply go faster than estimated as it's short and largely downhill
- We had one incident of dangerously careless running on stage 6 which I will take up with the team captain in question
- We have had a few instances of runners refusing to run with a phone and/or map. We decided against disqualifying them but the purpose of the phones is more to assist other runners. Again, will take up with team captains.

Course marking:

We changed the approach for this by doing a lot more marking in the days before the race, which is slightly riskier in terms of tampering and weather; a couple of arrows were removed and some washed out (poor ink in the labels) but generally this worked. We then marked woodland sections on the day (thanks to Chrissie Glew, Alan Pemberton, David Clarke, Phil Davies, and Rob Teer) on stages 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, 14, 16 and 19. We also need to add some additional sawdusting on small woodland sections on stages 5 and 20. Each year on stage 5 a handful of runners seem to take a different route into Little Missenden and we need to investigate. The revised approach also means that we have left some orange arrows around the course; marshals have removed some of these and we will drive the route to remove from the more sensitive areas; we were very careful not to leave any in Chevening or Epping Forest.

Timekeeping:

Timekeepers did a great job as usual. Thanks to Pat and Alan Short, Bob and Jane Wheller, Merran and Jim Sell, Roy Reeder, David Griffiths, Sue Waters, Carol Golsby, Mark Mabin, and Peter Wedderburn, who stepped in at short notice despite also competing. Peter also loans us safety equipment for the race.

Some observations:

- Will make clearer stage-specific briefing notes for the pre-race briefings with runners, as it wasn't always clear what to say and this is an important part of the safety provisions
- Parking is getting tough at Little Marlow and a couple of other changeover points, and we need to avoid causing resident trouble. We will review these over the summer. The priority is avoiding excessive disruption to local residents; runners can always find a way to get to and from changeovers.

Licence, Permissions and admin

Thanks to David Clarke, our race adjudicator, for his ongoing support for this event and his hard work in helping mark and marshal during the race.

Thanks to Alan Mawdsley for arranging licences, permits, permissions etc. A couple of cricket clubs and pubs asked to be added to the notification list, and two of the venues didn't seem to be aware of the agreed permissions, but overall this works very well.

Thanks to Evan Bond for work on graphics for publications, t-shirts and prizes, and to Roy Reeder for ordering t-shirts, taking photographs, and helping organise (as well as timekeeping).

And finally thanks to Professor Alex Cutting for running our financials, paying in cheques, handling team entries, arranging t-shirt sizes with team captains, preparing timekeeping materials, arranging Brentwood hotel and dinner, bagging and distributing t-shirts for all teams, driving the lead control car during the race, and arranging first-aid. I love you Alex!

The future:

We'd like to keep this going, in as similar a format as we can. The next one will be on the 19/20 May 2018, subject to licensing and checking. Some runners have pointed out clashes with other events but sadly at this time of the year that's impossible to avoid. The alternative would be 12/13 May which may clash with Stragglers club champs.

There will be more prizes to aim for, a few more patches of sawdust, but otherwise much of the same fun.