

Organisers had warned us that the course at course was the wettest it had ever been following heavy overnight rain and those seeking out “real” cross country conditions were not disappointed. The 370 competitors were treated to standing water with hidden hazards on the 5 ¼ mile route round the woodland tracks of Rough Common.

The opening two circuits around a wet playing field served to thin out the large field before they took to the woods. By this time Gareth Robb (Paddock Wood) had the lead with Simon Hesketh (Larkfield) and Anthony Jackson (Sittingbourne) just behind. Throughout the next two miles, the lead yo-yoed between these three but Mark Wilkins (Invicta) was keeping in touch less than 10 metres back. Wilkins made his move on the return track to the main field and quickly went to the front of the field. With Jackson, the Kent Road Race Grand Prix Champion, starting to slip back, it was left to Robb and Hesketh to give chase.

When the leaders emerged onto the field with 300 metres to go, Wilkins had a 20 yard lead ahead of Robb and Hesketh, still locked together. Mark Wilkins held his form to cross the line 5 seconds clear, thus achieving his first ever win in this competition. Gareth Robb was looking the stronger of the challengers and, despite two further attempts to overhaul him, Simon Hesketh had to settle for third place.

It was a full minute before the next two finishers emerged in the shape of Clayton Barrett and Leon Iwanca giving Medway & Maidstone’s team effort a great start. 7th finisher was Jamie Bailey (Thanet) who shows great promise having “graduated” from the junior league in recent years.

Kerrie Clarke (Medway and Maidstone) has recently returned to the sport following pregnancy and showed some of her old form by pressing Tina Oldershaw all the way. In the end, Oldershaw’s margin of victory (her third in a row) in the ladies’ race was just 8 seconds. Also making rare appearances in this league for Medway and Maidstone were Jenny Harnett (11th) and former champion Cathy Harvey in 12th position.

With Invicta and Medway having targetting this race - both clubs having been dormant for the first two - the entire complexion of the team championship was transformed. Invicta took the combined team race from Medway and Maidstone AC. The leaders in the championship were left to battle it out for 3rd place – Larkfield AC getting the verdict ahead of Paddock Wood. Larkfield AC now lead the Championship by just one point with 4 races still to come.

Congratulations to Canterbury Harriers for their efforts in staging this race – truly memorable by all those who took part. I know there were a few cuts and bruises sustained on the more rutted sections of waterlogged path but no serious injuries, I hope.

In this competition, we reward those who have shown the greatest improvement since last season. At this early stage, there are two main contenders in the ladies’ championship – Abi Johnson (Larkfield) and Claire Medes (Gravesend). In the men’s competition, there are three – Steve Tredray (New Eltham), Richard Hussey (Larkfield) and Geoff Kitchener (Sevenoaks). All the above have improved their ratings by more than 20% since last season.

Congratulations as well to the 16 finishers in the junior race – Jacob Puddle and Tanya Bailey were the main winners – full results and league table are attached separately.

For the next race, we return to South East London on 20th December for our annual visit to Oxleas Wood – another woody route with plenty of steep climbs and plunging descents. Further details to follow.

ROB BRIGHT (with thanks to Simon Hesketh)
30/11/09