

Over 3800 runners are set to descend on Berry Hill Park on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> October as the Saucony English Cross Country Relays return to Mansfield for the 20<sup>th</sup> successive year.

Organisers report a record entry of 1187 teams over the ten different race categories and with many spectators also travelling this is set to be one of Mansfield's biggest sporting events for many years.

Course Director Pat Carlan has been busy for weeks perfecting the course, which is now respected as one of the best cross country courses in the UK with the undulating parkland venue proving perfect for relay racing.

In all age groups except the Senior Men, where there are four runners, each of the other teams is made up of three. This week we take a look at the teams that are competing and next week we'll look at some of the individuals who'll be taking to the park.

Dominant in the Senior Men's event since 2000 have been Morpeth Harriers, who have finished in the top ten in all but one of the events since 2000.

Pushed into the bronze medal position last year by winners Bedford & County and runners up Borough of Hounslow, Morpeth have won the event on three occasions between 2000 and 2008 – being crowned champions in 2002, 2004 and 2005.

However with six different winners over the nine years other teams to look out for, apart from Morpeth and reigning champions Bedford & County, will be National Road Relay Champions Newham & Essex Beagles, Belgrave Harriers and Leeds City with the best local challenge likely to come from Notts AC (fourth in both 2007 and 2008).

Ian Hudspith, second Brit home in this year's Great North Run has been a regular member of the Morpeth team, and other names to have taken to the Park in recent years have included Olympians Andy Baddeley and Mo Farah, both of whom competed as Junior Men back in 2000 and 2001 before moving to the senior ranks.

Mansfield Harriers best place finish in recent years has been 12<sup>th</sup> – a position that Billy Farquharson, Ricky Soos, Lee Garrett and Derry Suter achieved in 2000 and that the first three of these along with Mark Johnson replicated in 2003.

If Morpeth have dominated the men's race there can be little doubt that Charnwood AC have done likewise in the women's event.

With top three placings every year since 2002, including victories in four out of the last five years, the reigning champions will surely be favourites again. However with several current internationals who have come through the age

groups in this event it won't be long before Aldershot, Farnham and District mount a serious challenge.

Consistent in the Charnwood team has been Tara Kryzwicki, who has been in the victorious trio on four of the last five occasions. Along with Jane Potter, Juliet Doyle and Hannah Whitmore the Leicestershire club certainly have strength in depth.

Aldershot, Farnham & District were winners of the recent National Road Relays and with internationals such as Steph Twell and Emma Pallant likely to be in the AFD team the Hampshire outfit will offer a strong challenge.

Chester-Le-Street, second last week at Birmingham and top five finishers at Mansfield for the last three years will also be hoping to appear in the medals.

Best local position in the women's race goes to Sutton-in-Ashfield Harriers, who missed out on the medals by just 13 seconds back in 2000. Here the trio of Lisa Knights, Claire Woollis and Debbie Robinson finished in sixth spot.

At U20 level the men's race has had no fewer than eight different winners since 2000 with Ipswich being the only team to hit glory twice with wins in 2003 and 2004. Reigning champions are New Marske Harriers.

In the U20 Women's race Charnwood dominated in 2000 and 2001 before their lead athletes moved up to the senior ranks and since 2002 Aldershot, Farnham & District (AFD) have appeared in the top five in all but one year, including victories in the last three championships.

European junior cross country silver medallist Charlotte Purdue goes on the last leg for AFD and with the fastest time at last weekend's National Road relays under her belt will be looking to retain the title from last year.

Purdue, who will be chasing Gold later in the year at the European Championships being held in Dublin speaks highly of the Mansfield event

"Every race I do is important to my season, other-wise I would not do it. But I think the Mansfield relays are important, as it shows the rest of the country the standard of our club and it's an enjoyable race to compete in. It's a good race to use a speed-work for the Euro's, as that'll be a fast race!"

Looking forward to this weekend's race the 18 year old goes on to say:

"Every year I have raced at the relays except for one and each time the race is different - I love the course and the fact that it is shorter than most cross-country races, as it feels like a track race, except with up hills and it's always really muddy!"

The Hampshire club's dominance has continued across all of the junior age

groups and culminated in a clean sweep across all age groups – male and female – in 2008.

At U17 men's level AFD took the 2008 title from Leicestershire based OWLS and the City of Norwich whilst in the women's event AFD were champions for the third successive year with Vale Royal AC from Cheshire in second and Rotherham AC in third. This was Aldershot's fifth victory in six years.

With AFD champions for the last two years in the Under 15 Boys race Mansfield have taken medals here in both 2002 and 2004. Silver was gained in 2002 when Stuart King and Chris Brown, both still stalwart members of the senior team, along with D. Bacon were second to AFD and then Heathcote, Hilton and Reid took bronze in 2004.

Harriers have never taken a medal at U15G level despite going close twice – taking fourth through Emily Collinge, Natalie Yates and Gemma Curley in 2002 and fifth in 2007 through Hannah Wragg, Rachel Brandham and Dea-Anna Davey.

AFD have total dominance at this age group however – taking Gold no fewer times than seven times since 2000, with the other two being silver – losing out to Bedford & County in 2000 and Leigh Harriers in 2006.

A similar Hampshire domination continues at U13 with the AFD boys making the top five every year since 2000 including victories in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2007 and 2008.

Mansfield's best performance here was in 2002 when Danny Heathcote, John Hilton and Aiden Reid took bronze behind AFD and Liverpool. An interesting name appears in the Harriers team back in 2000 when Richard Woolley, now one of the country's leading Javelin throwers, joined Chris Brown and Stuart King to secure sixth place.

AFD have also dominated the U13 Girls event with six victories from the last nine events. However it is here that Mansfield Harriers have had their greatest day. In 2005 Hannah Wragg, Laura Brown and Siobhan Harrison pushed AFD back into third spot when they took the national title with East Cheshire in silver medal position.

This was the third top five spot in nine years for Harriers with the trio of Yates, Whitley and Smith taking bronze in 2001 which was one place better than Collinge, Curley and Yates achieved in 2000. 2008 saw a Bronze medal for Chevelle Baxter, Molly Johnson and Caelidh Ross – the latter two will go again in this age group this year.

Spectators are very welcome at the event which kicks off at 11.00am with the full programme being:

11.00: Under 15 Boys (3x2K)

11.20: Under 15 Girls (3x2K)  
11.45: Under 13 Girls (3x2K)  
12.10: Under 13 Boys (3x2K)  
12.35: Junior Women (3x2.5K)  
12.40: Under 17 Women (3x2.5K)  
13.05: Junior Men (3x3K)  
13.10: Under 17 Men (3x3K)  
13.35: Senior Women (3x3K)  
14.15: Senior Men (4x5K)