

2013 British Fell Relays: Dark Peak and HBT dominate

Some seriously autumnal weather did nothing to dampen the spirits of some of the UK's best fell runners at the 25th running of the British Fell and Hill Relays today. Dark Peak's men and HBT's women also shined as the wind and rain ripped across ridges of Moel Eilio above Llanberis...

The traditional mass start on leg one had many donning their waterproofs as nearly 200 intrepid fell runners hit the slopes above Glyn Rhonwy on leg one, and it was the class of Murray Strain that impressed the most as they began to return to the finish area after around 7.5km of running. Competing for Hunters Bog Trotters, Strain was almost a minute ahead of a gaggle of runners which included teams from Leeds City, Dark Peak and Calder Valley, and with Strain handing over to James McMullan and Orlando Edwards, things were looking very strong for the HBT.

In the women's race Holmfirth's Katie Walshaw absolutely blasted it round the first leg, so much so that she was over 20 seconds faster than 2013 joint English and British fell champion Victoria Wilkinson in second place (who incidentally didn't hand over to any team-mates). However, the big-hitting ladies of HBT, Dark Peak and Ambleside were biding their time and settling into their running in the top 10 as they headed out onto leg 2.

The second leg was the day's longest, with 14.5km, 1000m of ascent and winds of over 70mph to negotiate, oh and the small matter of the acclimb up the steep-beast that is Moel Cynghorion, along with the ridge up to Moel Eilio, before returning to Llanberis. As they did so, the HBT pairing of McMullan and Edwards were still holding their own, coming back into the handover area with a lead of around a minute from Dark Peak. Running one of the most impressive legs of the day were Rob Jebb and Ian Holmes, as the two fell legends showed the rest how to do it, scything through the field to rise from 8th to 3rd.

It was here that the V40 and V50 races also began to take shape, as Calder Valley and Borrowdale started to square up to each other, with the red and white hoops of James Logue coming into transition first, and well up in the overall race too. Carnethy's vets had started as they meant to go on, with a big lead in the V50 category.

HBT's effort on leg 2 of the women's race will probably go down as one of the performances of the this championships and many others, as Claire Gordon and Tessa Hill showed their class, taking the girls in brown from 9th into the lead. Their time of 1:29:57 was almost 3 mins up on the next team, and that pair was none other than Angela Mudge and Jasmin Paris! Behind HBT, the Ambleside ladies started to challenge, coming in second, with Dark Peak in third. These three placings were pretty much set, and from here on in were to be the main protagonists in the women's category.

Leg 3 at the Fell Relays is historically the 'nav leg' and often proves decisive. 2013 was to be no different as the Dark Peak pairing of Oli Johnson and Lloyd Taggart were utterly supreme on the 12.5km stint, which took in the valleys below Moel Eilio. The estimated ascent of 915m and with what one runner described as "a hell of a lot of traversing", it was also going to be a measure of some all-round fell running ability for those wishing to excel. So it proved, as Johnson and Taggart essentially ran the Dark Peak boys into an unassailable lead as they returned to the changeover, some 83 minutes later. Such was the extent of their dominance on that leg that they not only took the lead, but they returned an advantage of over 11 minutes onto the last leg for their anchor man, Kris Jones - surely too much for anyone to overall on the last leg.

2012 champions Mercia, who had not really shown until now, were majestically run into the silver medal position by Graham Gristwood and Tim Davies, with the men in yellow advancing from 7th to 2nd in that leg. Penine had a stormer on leg 3 too, heading out in third, just ahead of the Dark Peak 'B' team and host club Eryri Harriers.

In the vets 40 class, Borrowdale also took command, with master navigator Steve Birkinshaw and Andy Schofield giving their final leg man, Paul Cornforth, almost 4 mins lead as he headed out. In the 50's class, Carnethy were still out in front, chased hard by Helm Hill and Dark Peak.

HBT were still well in control in the women's race as the baton was passed to 2012 3 Peaks winner Sarah O'Neil, and with a lead of almost 6 minutes all she needed to do was keep her nerve to retain the title for the Edinburgh club. Behind 2013 Ian Hodgson ladies champs of a couple of weeks ago, Ambleside were comfortable in second, but Annie Conway was obviously not going to go down without a fight for the Cumbrians. In third, Dark Peak were looking good for yet another medal, as the Yorkshire club were now set to medal in every category.

If Mercia had designs on taking the 2013 men's title once again (especially with 2013 English fell champ Simon Bailey on the last leg) they were to be finally quashed on the final leg, as DPFR man Kris Jones ran one of the most impressive solo legs of the day. Such was his performance that Bailey was only able to take around 25 seconds out of him over the last 8.5km slog up to the top of Moel Eilio and back. With a considerable and appreciative crowd gathered in the finish arena Jones returned to the huge cheers of his team and club mates as Dark Peak were once again crowned British Fell Relay Champions.

Bailey took the silver for Mercia, and with a storming run on leg 4, Will Boothman ran the Yorkshire men of Dark Peak B into a superb (and possibly unexpected) bronze medal. However, a nod must go to Eryri's last man Russell Bentley here too, as he climbed to within a handful of seconds of Boothman as they entered the last mile, only to lose his footing on a number of occasions on the last descent and take 4th place for the Eryri boys.

There was to be an equally exciting finish in the MV40 race when Borrowdale's 3 minute plus lead going into the last leg was slashed to just 25 seconds by the finish, as Calder Valley's Karl Gray stormed around the last leg with Borrowdale's Paul Cornforth in his sights. However, his galant effort wasn't to be quite enough, and the title went back to Cumbria and boys in purple.

Dark Peak's Mike Robinson had set off with Eryri Harriers' 40 plus anchor Paul Jenkinson on leg 4, as the battle for bronze would be down to the last 8km leg. The Dark Peak man used his strong descending skills to good effect as he pulled out a minute on Jenks over the closing miles, to take yet another medal for Dark Peak.

In the MV50 class Carnethy's Stewart Whitlie made no mistakes on the Moel Eilio leg, taking a convincing lead for the Scots, finishing almost 10 minutes to the good on Helm Hill, with Dark Peak's 'Gents' coming home third for their what was to be their 6th medal of the day.

In the women's race, there was to be no such drama as O'Neil kept her cool, and the top spot, to take HBT to glory. The Scottish club eventually ran out champions by just under 4 minutes from Ambleside, who - with Conway charging hard on the last leg - had taken almost 3 minutes out of the HBT lead. Pippa Wilkie also held things together well for Dark Peak as they took the bronze. A mention is also needed here for Pippa Maddams and Lauren Jeska. It was good to see the former British fell champions back in the fold, with Pippa taking Keswick from 8th to 5th, and Jeska running the fastest female 4th leg. Let's hope they both have good winters and are back on the women's fell scene again in 2014.

With women's fell running pioneer Joan Glass on hand to give out the prizes, and the rain abating at last, all that was left to do was to dish out the hardware to the winning teams, with all participants agreeing that the Eryri club had put on a championships to remember.

2014 sees the Fell Relays organisation going to Kirby Lonsdale and Dallam and Howgill clubs, and if they do as good a job as we saw in Wales today it should be yet another championships to savour.

Top 3's

Open Men

1. Dark Peak Fell Runners 'Fairbrook' - 4:02:00
2. Mercia Fell Runners - 4:13:15
3. Dark Peak Fell Runners 'Grindslow' - 4:18:43

Open Women

1. Hunters Bog Trotters - 5:02:26
2. Ambleside AC - 5:06:17
3. Dark Peak Fell Runners - 5:19:08

Men V40

1. Borrowdale - 4:29:25
2. Calder Valley Fell Runners - 4:29:49
3. Dark Peak Fell Runners - 4:44:26

Men V50

1. Carnethy - 4:52:27
2. Helm Hill 5:01:53
3. Dark Peak Fell Runners - 5:05:31