

## Welsh Castles Relay – here we go again!

June is coming up, so time to get organized for the Welsh Castles Relay, we've got a few titles to defend after all. Shame we couldn't have a vets team this year, but the event was massively over-subscribed due to its popularity. So need to make sure our men's and ladies' teams are up there to try and defend the 4 titles they amassed between them last year (overall, ladies, kings & queens of the mountains). Having only 2 teams, the even higher than expected drop-out rate from the girls' team, some injury worries, and lack of drivers saw a bit of readjustments (i.e. last minute panic), but in the end we had enough runners, drivers and accommodation to set the basis for a great weekend.

Jane Fanning, having volunteered again to captain, had more than the usual nightmare to put the ladies team together, how she managed to keep her cool I'll never know. Record number of drop-outs, replacing almost half the team in the last two weeks, and injury worries from a lot of our regular mountain girls necessitated quite a number of stage reshuffles, but the team still looked strong going into the weekend. Which happened minus their team captain, who was whisked away to Paris by her husband for a weekend of food, vin rouge and music. Teresa got them off to a great start though, coming 7<sup>th</sup> overall on the 1<sup>st</sup> stage and almost catching our men's runner, before heading off to run a half marathon the next day. Sarah and Liz nicely extended the lead, before Becky, back from 3 months off running due to injury ("I'm not allowed to run faster than 8 minutes per mile"), won stage 4 and passed the baton on to Claire L., who never let the Winchester girl out of sight on stage 5. Karen, another last minute replacement on a day trip up from London, added another stage win on 6 and complained about the lack of competition. Catherine H. won the second mountain stage despite just having been moved onto it on Wednesday and sported a big grin and her well deserved yellow sweater afterwards. Kate's knee kept her from running too hard on stage 8, so second place only, before Victoria, another injury worry, won stage 9. Mariah, having been told only Wednesday it would be 13 miles instead of a shorter stage, was in a bit of a rush to catch the USA game, following Michaela McCallum from Winchester home and defending a huge lead in the Queens of the Mountains. After the match, dinner and a very short night, Claire I. was wide awake and reasonably well recovered from injury to make it 3<sup>rd</sup> lady on the early mountain stage out of Newtown and to widen the gap to Winchester even further. Birthday girl Ella got a nice 2<sup>nd</sup> place on stage 12 before Claire S. won stage 13. Natalie, Lou and Catherine had strong and solid runs up and down the steepest mountain sections and easily held off Winchester's slightly belated resurgence to seal the defence of the Queens of the Mountains title. Sylvie then stormed down from Beacons reservoir to take 6<sup>th</sup> place overall and the 7<sup>th</sup> stage win for the ladies team, an impressive feat. Hannah, Penny and Fiona brought the overall win home with almost an hour and a half to spare over Winchester in a time of 24:14:35, the fastest time ever for a ladies team at WCR, well done!

Andy Davies again captained the men's team, but much to his dislike there were exactly zero drop-outs and the stiff competition for team places between the boys meant he didn't even get to run himself, which says something about the strength of the team. Not getting off to the best start with a slight wobble from John in 5<sup>th</sup> place on stage 1, the men put in very solid performances with Martin 4<sup>th</sup>, Eric P. 3<sup>rd</sup> in his mountains debut, and Caspar, Jol and Duncan all 2<sup>nd</sup> behind THH (who seemed to concentrate on individual stage wins), but had to wait until stage 8 for a win. Then it came in style with an impressive run from Steve to start clawing back some of the lead THH had built. Andy T. made up a bit more time coming second on stage 9 and then it was time for the big show-down on stage 10. Nick, having finally received his England vest and just back from 7<sup>th</sup> place and a sub 30 minute finish at the BUPA London 10000, probably concentrated a bit too much on the opposition from Sale and not enough on the stage record, but brought home a convincing first ever mountain stage win for Serpentine and got us into the overall lead overnight, just 3 minutes ahead of Thames. Which meant that Eric V.'s time trial up stage 11 was only the second mountain stage win, but an impressive one nonetheless, holding off the Winchester runner quite easily. Paul H. and Miguel continued to extend the lead with a 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> place, before it was time for the Drovers leg. History repeating itself, Richard twisted his ankle the Wednesday before WCR, but declared himself fit enough to run, the slightly dodgy ankle preventing him from adding to the mountain stage wins, but still an impressive 2<sup>nd</sup> place behind Sale. Robin managed to get down stage 15

without falling over and once realising the Sale guy in front of him was not the international athlete he thought, took off the brakes and sprinted to win the stage. Then it was a mountain time trial again, Hendrik in his WCR debut looking very much in control, taking the third mountain stage for Serpentine this weekend and securing the Kings of the Mountains title. A few more 2<sup>nd</sup> places by Andy Robbins on stage 17, Simon on 19, and Andy Reeves on the final stage were punctuated by the stage win of Tiago on stage 18 with a new stage record. The very solid team performance with 6 stage wins, 9 second places and no placing outside of the top 5 saw the men's team win with over an hour to spare and inching ever closer to the 20 hour mark.

By the time we got to Cardiff castle you started feeling left out if you didn't have a yellow sweater, even if it only said veteran stage winner on it, and having retained all 4 titles there were many more prizes and sweaters to pick up. The presentation suffered a bit from the rain, but a good opportunity to thank Les Croupiers for the great event they put on year after year. Many thanks to Alan Thomas for his perfect organization of the Castles over the years; we appreciate how much hard work goes into the ever perfect organization of such a fabulous race and love coming back, so will be looking forward to hear from Richard Brewer next year. On our side thanks must go to our drivers (Richard, Hugh, Andy D., Fiona, Andy T., Claire S., Nick, David, Jane H., Jol, Paul), who let me twist their arms to drive and got us round safely and to Lisa for sorting out accommodation in her ever efficient way, never getting stressed, even when the umpteenth stage change came through. Guess we should buy them and the team captains a drink next time we meet them, great job everyone.

Same procedure for WCR 2011? Keep the weekend of June 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> free.

Paul Fromme.