

The 2012 Junior Inter-Regional Championships at Sandringham, Norfolk

A personal account by Ella Gilbert

It was the team aspect I liked most about the Junior Inter-Regional Championships. It added a whole different dimension to things. Normally, when I run I only let myself down when I make mistakes, but over the weekend I was anxious not to let the team down. Even though East Anglia's team wasn't big enough to contend for the higher places, it didn't matter to me, I was still worried about making a mess up and letting people down.

In the days leading up to the race, I was quite stressed about the whole thing. But I was also really excited, which mainly blotted out my negative thoughts. I've taken part in several big events now, but I think this one definitely was the one I both looked forward to and dreaded most.

When the day itself arrived, I made it down to Sandringham in one piece, the only mishap being to forget my running shoes and having to turn back half way there! I've never run at Sandringham before, so I wasn't sure what the terrain would be like. The car park was heaving, and that buzzing atmosphere already caked the place. I got an EAJS top, which really made me feel the part, and had a look round at the start and finish. As NOR was organizing the first day, it was nice because I knew a lot of people, and it made me feel a bit more at home.

All the team tents were lined up on a large patch of open ground, really close to the spectator control. The weather was good, so I spent most of the afternoon watching from there. It was good to have a focal point where most of the team and all the parents were gathered, as it meant I was able to get to know people a bit more. It was a lot more communal than I thought it would be, and really good fun, especially as I didn't know a few people on the team that well.

I had one of the latest start times, which later turned out to have its own blessings, so I only got to watch a few people go through the spectator control. It took a lot longer than anybody thought it would for the first runner to come into sight! Who says East Anglia doesn't have hard terrain? Finally I went to the start, and hung around until my time was called up.

I can't tell you what a relief it was when I finally got to pick up my map and start running. I did the first control well, which really helped me get into the zone, and I ran out all the tension. The terrain was really good, and a bit harder than I'm generally used to, which made it even better. The paths were mainly quite visible, though there were quite a lot of them, which meant staying in contact with the map was important.

Then there was the bracken. It was easily taller than me in some points, which made visibility very poor, and meant that running on paths was often the quickest option. As so many people had been through already, paths to the checkpoints had been beaten down. It was a bit of a shame, as it took away a bit of the more precise navigating, but on the whole I was quite grateful for it as on the few times I had to battle my way through, it was practically impossible to make any progress.

The rhododendrons were a big help, as long as you didn't have to go into them. On the map, and on the actual run, they were easily visible. But there were so many of them, and they all looked similar, so I found myself always double checking the map. I also had to turn back a few times because of dead ends. However helpful they may be, rhododendrons are definitely impenetrable.

I was fairly pleased with my run, though I messed up checkpoint two. There were several occasions where I got completely mixed up on which path I was on, but those were counterbalanced by some legs I feel I did well. The spectator control was great fun to run through as well as watch. There was a long stretch of open ground, meaning that you could see the tents from miles away, and the team could see you.

The general noise from the teams was loud, and I can say for sure that when you get cheered through the control, it makes you run a lot faster. Yet again, it was something that really made me feel like I was part of a team.

Once I was finished, I was immensely relieved. I could have easily knocked a lot of time off my run if I hadn't made several of the mistakes I did, but I was quite pleased with it, and that was good enough for me.

East Anglia did pretty well that day, with Rhiannon coming twenty-second (our only W16 runner), Thomas (M18) in seventeenth place, and Bryn coming ninth in M16. In the overall team results we came ninth with scores from our male runners and eleventh with our girls.

LynnSport was packed full by the time I got there. People had been packing up when I finished, so most had already arrived. East Anglia had taken a table for themselves, and most of the team sat round while they ate. It was really nice, and afterwards we played card games until the prize giving.

Though East Anglia only had one reason to cheer (a third place on the M14 by William Louth) it was still good fun, and after that we were allowed to go into the main hall where we would be sleeping.

There was a lot of whispering after lights out! I was tired and wide awake at the same time, and it took ages to actually drop off. Every single cough or rustle was amplified, and it was about half eleven that things finally quietened down.

The morning passed with packing up again, eating a quick breakfast, and driving off to Sandringham. I'd never done a relay before, and I was running in the W16 class to make up the numbers. That meant doing the mass start, and I really didn't want to be the person at the back staring at the map like they had no clue what to do.

The whole system was explained by Clive, the EAJS coach. And the team tents were set up next to the spectator control again. It was drizzling slightly, which as it turned out was only a precursor to the coming weather.

The noise was even worse than the day before. One team had even got hold of some vuvuzelas, and there was a lot of cheering. The boys' mass start was ten minutes before the girls, and it was mayhem. A very exciting start, to what proved to be a brilliant day. They went off in a flash, disappearing into a clump of trees. We had four teams for boys - though with an injury on the previous day, one team (Andrew and Sam) was running just for fun - so four runners in the mass start Bryn, Roderick, Tom and Andrew.

I love the atmosphere at orienteering events, but none of the ones I've been to compared to this. Even though the drizzle had turned to a steady rain by then, all the people who weren't running straight off were crowded into places where they could see the start. I said I'd never done a relay, but watching one was definitely as memorable as running in it.

Once the boys were off, the W16 female runners had to go through the same procedure. We managed two teams; Rachel and I were running first. It was still raining, so warming up was more a matter of staying warm. With a lot of the crowd already running or about to run, the hype wasn't quite as crazy, for which I was relieved. It was surprisingly easy just to blot it all out, and concentrate on not feeling too queasy.

Then with the blast of a whistle we were off. It was completely thrilling, and I wasn't even near the front of the pack. There was something about it that was different from anything I've ever done, and I am now a converted fan. Even score events aren't a patch on the atmosphere, as there is nobody urging you on.

I lost the pack by about checkpoint three, and managed to navigate the course fairly well. By about the half-way point however, the rain was more like a "power shower", and it was absolutely tipping it down. Probably the heaviest rain I've seen all year. Downhill paths had turned into streams, and

every time you had to venture into the ferns, all the water they collected transferred to you. I was just glad I was running, and not having to wait around in the changeover pen, as when I changed over with the second runner in my relay team, Katherine, she was absolutely soaked.

The spectator control was even better than the previous day. The planner had made a corridor, with rhododendron bushes on one side, and the team tents on the other. Even when I was a few checkpoints away, I could hear the shouting. Everybody was hiding inside the tents, but every runner still got a cheer of encouragement from their respective teams.

There was no point getting changed, as it was still raining when I finished, and by that time, thunder was adding to the din. After that we waited for everybody to get back. Hanging around the spectator control was good fun, once the weather cleared. We got our maps, and it was good to compare my course to everyone else's on the relay.

My relay team ended up twenty-second, just beating East Anglia's other female team (who came in twenty-sixth). The first two runners in the other EA girls relay team (Rachel and Bronwyn both posting great times) beating Katherine and me, but Rhiannon just overtaking Sam in the W18 race.

The boys in the team did really well too, with twenty-first being our best result (Tom, William and Todd) and a twenty-eighth (Roderick, James and Chris). With a mis-punch (affecting Bryn, Tim and George) we ended up with only four teams scoring. Everybody did amazingly, whether for their run on one of the days, or just giving huge amounts of support to everybody else.

Chris was our best M18 runner that day, with the fastest time of one hour twenty. Both Roderick and Tom posted times very, very close to the winning one that day too.

Then it was the prize giving. We were still waiting for Sam Bailey to come in (who was out for an exhausting hour and three quarters) so some of the team stayed around the finish. We interrupted the ceremony to cheer her in, gaining several funny looks in the process!

In the end, East Anglia came tenth out of twelve, with Scotland winning the entire event.

Afterwards, we hung around to get a few team photos, and received lots chocolates (courtesy of John Ward). Who says coming third from last is bad?

At the end, there was one mishap, a W14 runner getting lost, and search parties were sent out. However, she was quickly found, absolutely fine, and all the runners could go home, more than slightly wet.

This event was the first like it I've ever been to, and it was definitely memorable. The whole team was amazing, and I would like to thank our coach, Clive, for explaining everything when it was new and confusing. Everybody who organized the event, and helped it run smoothly also deserves a huge amount of thanks. I for one had an amazing time, and I'm looking forward to going again next year.