

World Mountain Running Trophy 2004 – England Team Report from Robin Bergstrand

A combination of good team and individual performances marked England's participation in the 20th running of this event. "Uphill only" championship races always present a tough challenge for the English team. Only 3 of the 49 medals that England has won at the World Trophy have come from uphill only races. Finishing with 4 individuals in the top 10 of their respective events in Sauze d'Oulx is therefore an excellent achievement, and the 4th places of the junior and senior men's teams are effective 'best ever' performances in an uphill only World Trophy. Equivalent places were achieved in 1987 in Lenzerheide, but the depth of team competition in those early days was much less than today. The appearance of an Eritrean team in the junior and senior men's events, for only the second time at the World Trophy, threw pre-event predictions slightly out of line. The WMRA is pushing for the continued globalisation of the World Trophy in its quest for official IAAF World Championship status, and the presence of quality athletes can only help to raise the credibility of the event. However, accusations that the Eritreans were being paced and even physically pushed up the hill by their supporters made some observers wonder about the price to be paid for globalisation.

Billy Burns achieved his 5th top 10 placing from his last 5 senior World Trophy appearances. These have included 2 uphill only races, and Billy also gained a 3rd place in the 2004 Sierre Zinal race – the inaugural WMRA 'long distance' championship. No other male runner has achieved such consistency across the mountain running disciplines. Billy was well supported by John Brown with a best ever 8th place. This result reflects 3 years of hard work by John, during which he has focused on achieving mountain running success. Martin Cox battled against the intermittent leg problem that has affected his last two seasons for 30th place. Tim Short ran an excellent England debut in 39th place, after a very late call up to the team. Tim's selection as reserve was based on top 10 performances in this year's Sierre-Zinal and Matterhorn races.

The junior men's team combined experience with closely matched ability. In an event where close packing is critical, a good team performance was therefore a possibility. The team delivered, pulling through the field after a sensible start to close the team inside 25 for 4th place overall. Andy Ellis and Mark Buckingham will hopefully transfer their ability into the senior ranks, but Chris Doyle and Alistair Brownlee have the opportunity to come back better and stronger in the junior championship.

The women's team saw an injection of fresh blood in the form of Maddie Horton and Victoria Wilkinson, alongside seasoned internationals Louise Sharp and Natalie White. Maddie has been building a good reputation across all running surfaces this year. She added to this with a very positive World Trophy debut in 18th place, beating among others the Sierre-Zinal winner Angeline Joly. Two places behind Maddie was Victoria Wilkinson. The former World Trophy junior winner made a welcome return to international mountain running after a six year absence.

The World Trophy moved on a generation as Emma Stuart represented England 20 years after her father Kenny had won the inaugural event in San Vigilio, Italy. Her 18th place as a first year junior bodes well for the future. Emma backed up an excellent 8th place finish by Sarah Tunstall, who has one more year in this age group.

A small but vociferous group of England supporters helped to motivate the athletes onwards and upwards over the weekend, and thanks are due to Jack Ellis and Denise Park for their very valuable contribution to team management over the course of the event.