

**ESAA TRACK & FIELD CHAMPIONSHIPS**  
**DON VALLEY STADIUM**  
**SHEFFIELD**  
**10th - 11th July 2009**

The twenty-five members of the Dorset Schools' team (selected from twenty different schools) travelled with their team managers to Sheffield on Thursday 9th July. Leaving King's Park at 11.00, the 402 kilometres of the journey were uneventful, apart from the final twenty minutes when endeavouring to find Stephenson Hall at the University of Sheffield where we were billeted. The prize for guessing the distance travelled, awarded by the coach driver, was won by Natalie Whisken, whose estimate was 400 kilometres: an auspicious beginning to her weekend.

Having been given our keys and left our bags in our rooms, we joined the long queue for the evening meal. It took forty minutes to be served, but the wait was just about worth it. There was a team meeting when details of the following day were examined before the traditional strict Dorset curfew, which team managers had no difficulty in enforcing as the athletes were tired from the journey and keyed up before the challenge of the next two days.

To be considered for selection, athletes usually have to have achieved a demanding "Entry Standard" in their event. Those who achieve the even higher "National Standard" are normally guaranteed selection. Dorset is restricted to a maximum of twenty-five athletes as are the other fourteen "C" category counties, this being based on the size of the school population.

Points are scored for finishing in the top eight in an event, with an additional point being awarded if the Entry Standard is achieved and two additional points if the National Standard is reached. For an athlete to achieve these levels of performance in the biggest events on the calendar (the championships are often referred to as "The Kids' Olympics") when they are under very significant pressure is no mean achievement. The fact that no fewer than nine athletes achieved a National Standard, eight an Entry Standard and, perhaps the best statistic of all, ten achieved personal best performances, bears testimony to the talent of the youngsters and the skill of their coaches who managed to get them to their peak when it really mattered. Almost half of the team finished in the top eight in the country in their event, and although there were "only" four medallists (two gold, one silver and one bronze), there were three fourths, three fifths, a sixth and an eighth as well.

In the Junior Girls' category (years 8 and 9), Natalie Whisken (Ferndown

Middle), the baby of the team as she is in the bottom year of the two year category, threw several personal bests to earn the silver medal in the javelin. Grace Howie (Talbot Heath) ran strongly in her 1500m heat to qualify for the final where she ran excellently, taking almost two seconds off her previous personal best in finishing fifth.

In the Intermediate Girls' category (years 10 and 11), Millie Courtney was involved in one of the highest quality races of the weekend. She qualified comfortably for the final of the 1500m and achieved a National Standard in finishing fifth. She would have needed to improve on her already impressive personal best to have achieved a medal.

In the Senior Girls' category (years 12 and 13), it was fitting that the girls' captain, Jemma Tewkesbury, competing in her sixth ESAA Championships, should win the gold medal in the javelin. A loyal and talented athlete, Jemma has graced the Dorset team in many competitions during her time as a school athlete. The result was always in doubt as there were three athletes throwing over 41 metres and the official responsible for the revolving distance board managed frustratingly to position himself in front of it, hiding the last two critical digits! Colfox's Megan Tuck (who also qualified in the hammer, but who opted for the discus) finished a very creditable sixth.

In the Junior Boys' category (years 8 and 9), three of the four selected athletes achieved personal bests. One cannot ask for more from young sportsmen in their first-ever national schools' Track and Field Championships. Pride of place in this section goes to Poole Grammar's Gavin Newbury who improved his personal best several times during the competition in the triple jump, finishing an excellent fourth. International cross country runner, Ben Westhenry (All Saints, Weymouth), knocked more than three seconds off his PB in a red-hot 1500m heat. He was not quite able to reproduce this in the final on the following day, but can be well satisfied with his weekend. Jack Snook (Queen Elizabeth's, Wimborne) set a PB in the pole vault.

Pride of place must go to the Intermediate Boys' team (years 10 and 11). Their team total of 39.5 points was enough to defeat our rivals, Somerset, by half a point. However, this impressive tally would have won the "B" category competition consisting of much bigger counties and indeed Dorset would have finished seventh on the "A" category, which must represent one of our best ever age-group performances for some considerable time. Andrew Elkins (Lytchett Minster), despite being small by hammer throwing standards, cannot be bettered where the qualities of speed and technique are concerned. He has already competed internationally and the self-belief which comes from the knowledge that he is four metres ahead of his nearest rival is never permitted to

manifest itself in arrogance or over-confidence. His is a name to note for the future. His victory was comprehensive. Corfe Hills' Jack Partridge, competing in the 1500m steeplechase, came under pressure on the final lap from a Kent athlete, but his vastly superior technique over the water jump and the final barrier ensured that he comfortably took the bronze medal, finishing frustratingly close to the silver medallist. His was another personal best and earned him a reserve place in the England team for the following week's international match. Sherborne's Simon Davies was the surprise package: second in his heat of the 400m hurdles with a personal best of 56.18, he then went on to improve with 55.95 for fourth place in the final. Alex Cox (Bishop of Winchester, Bournemouth) is a previous winner of the high jump when a junior boy. Having moved up a category, he inevitably found the competition tougher, but his leap of 1m90 was the same as that achieved by the athlete finishing second. Unfortunately, Alex cleared this height at his second attempt and his first failure cost him the silver medal. Bournemouth School's Fergus O'Reilly ran a superb PB in the 3000m, taking two and a half seconds off his previous best, recording 8-52.19, an excellent time for a runner who will be in the same age group again next year. Continuing the splendid form of the pole vaulters in the squad, Poole High's Adam Carpenter set a new PB of 4m10, another national standard and good enough for fifth place.

The boys' captain, Matt Sloane (Twynham), finished fifth in the Senior Boys' high jump with a leap of 1m99. He was also the narrow winner (after a tie-break against Andrew Elkins and Jemma Tewkesbury) of the quiz that athletes completed on the journey up to Sheffield.

The team managers all spoke highly of the commitment and attention to detail of the squad and were impressed by their approach to the whole weekend. It might seem obvious that all competitors at a national event would treat the occasion with seriousness and focus, but this was not universally the case among all counties. Waking the team members at 6.00 a.m. was much less painful than one might imagine and there was never a complaint about the long queues which are often an integral part of competing in a major championship.

Team managers: Liz Scott, Trudi Carter, Chris Buller, Brian Camp, Tim Watton, Graeme Gourlay, Peter Fryer.