



Pearson pips Bannister

THE Reebok Cross Challenge ventured into Scotland for the first time and saw some exciting finishes in both senior races, Bob Frank reports.

Andrew Pearson and home favourite Vicki McPherson both won although neither with the ease which appeared likely midway through their respective last laps.

Pearson and national champion Dominic Bannister were given the same time after a sprint for the line, which Pearson edged to boost his confidence.

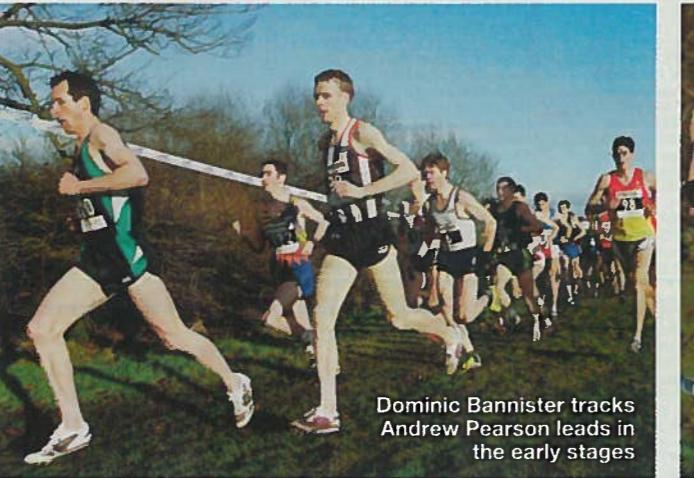
A non-finisher in the series' opener at Birmingham and a non-starter in the second at Margate, Pearson made it third time lucky over an undulating Cumbernauld course.

But after breaking away on the third of four laps, Pearson was reeled in by Bannister and the Bingley man had to dig deep to respond.

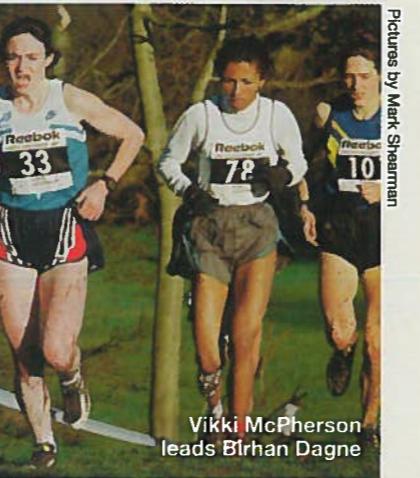
Pearson had pushed the pace from the start and by the end of the first lap only Bannister was in contact. Already a three-way battle for the final podium place was ensuing between Scottish stars Bobby Quinn and Chris Robison and Birchfield's Rob Birchall. That battle was to last most of the 8km distance but there was no challenging the leading duo who continued to pull away on the soggy and undulating course.

Into lap two, Bristol's Charlie Wood was leading the next pack in sixth, but by the halfway stage he'd been passed by Scotland's Dan Leggate and Tipton's Ian Pierce. Also in the chase were Deon McNeilly, Andy Coleman, leading junior Gavin Thompson, Geoff Pyrah and Alan Puckrin.

Climbing the biggest hill of the lap, at the start of the third circuit, Bannister nosed just ahead of Pearson as a 14-second gap had grown to the chasing trio. A further 19 seconds went by before Leggate passed in an isolated sixth with



Dominic Bannister tracks Andrew Pearson leads in the early stages



Vikki McPherson leads Birhan Dagne

Pictures by Mark Shannan

little change behind.

But over the half-mile that followed the main hill, Pearson began to pull away from Bannister, who had finished 18th in the European Championships in Italy just six days earlier.

Pearson continued to edge clear of the Durham physio and into the final lap he was 20 metres clear. Birchall began to lose contact with Quinn and Robison as the pair battled for the honour of being first Scot. Leggate was still on his own in sixth while further back McNeilly was losing ground on Pierce and Wood.

Pearson's advantage grew to 30 metres and he appeared to have done enough – but Bannister thought otherwise. Having stopped the gap growing, he then set about reducing it and in the final straight drew up to the shoulder of Pearson and appeared set to deny the former European cross country bronze medallist.

But Pearson, low in confidence this winter but not lacking determination, he fought back to snatch the lead again just before the line. Both athletes were given the same time of 26:47.

Pearson said: "I've been training hard for the last three weeks, running 90 miles a week, and I knew Dominic was strong. But in many ways it was a make or break race for me.

"I wasn't in shape to go for the European Cross Country Championships because I've

been a bit behind my usual standards and I lost confidence. But I've been to see a sports psychologist a couple of times, organised by PAS, and I knew I was strong so I decided to go out hard. If anyone wanted to hang on they could hang on but I was determined to make it hard for them.

"I got a bit of a stitch on the last lap and I could feel the gap closing. He really came back at me but I ran 3:40 for 1500m last year so I knew I had a kick."

Pearson, hoping to make the World Cross Country Championships team in Belfast in March, will line up in Durham on January 2, saying: "With Jon Brown in the field there it will be a different type of race."

Bannister, first Briton in last year's European Cross Country Championships, was happy with his performance. He said: "It was hard because I had a hard race in Ferrara last week. I've taken it easy this week and I felt okay for the first lap but Andrew pushed quite hard from the word go and I felt he had the upper hand.

"I tried to go ahead on the third lap but he came back and then opened a gap. With half a mile to go he wasn't getting away and I started to catch him, which spurred me on. When I caught him I thought I'd got it but he just got ahead again."

"I was in shape to go for the European Cross Country Championships because I've

Despite having to settle for second best on this occasion, Bannister feels there is more to come: "I'll take a bit of a break now and then hope to get in shape for the Trials and World Cross Country Championships. I don't feel I peaked for the Europeans, making the team was a bonus. Getting into the team and running well was a nice confidence boost for Christmas but I think there's more to come next year."

Bannister is undecided about defending his National title. If he makes the team for Belfast he could well be away for three weeks preparing for those championships.

The battle for third saw Quinn produce a superb final lap to open 14 seconds on Birchall. Robison went with Quinn as they made a break early on the final lap but he paid for his efforts as Birchall passed him for fourth. But Robison joined Quinn as a member of the successful West District team, who won by 80 points.

Birchall admitted: "By the finish I was going at jogging pace but Chris must have been as well because he didn't come back at me. Dominic ran well at the Europeans last week and I was 32 seconds behind him today, so it's good to compare. I hope to get in shape for the Trials but I'll miss Durham as I'm going to Australia for three weeks from December 28. I'll probably do a road or track race while I'm there."

The women's race also produced an exciting finale as McPherson was closed down by former national junior champion Birhan Dagne.

McPherson, who's won three times on this Cumbernauld course in the Inter-District Championships, looked to have victory sewn up until Dagne's late surge gave her a shock.

She said: "I heard my dad scream at me and I thought she must be closing, but when I looked round at the finish line and saw her right on my shoulder I couldn't believe it.

"I really thought I'd pulled away from her."

And indeed she had. McPherson looked strong throughout and was prominent as a group of five – including Dagne, opening series race runner-up Heather Heasman, Lucy Wright and youngster Julie Ingman pulled clear midway round the opening lap. A 20-metre gap stretched back to Tara Krzywicki in sixth, followed by Lynne MacDougall, the British international from local club City of Glasgow.

Up for the hill for the second time, McPherson was already edging away as Dagne and Wright battled it out for second with Heasman losing ground in fourth. A gap followed to Ingman in fifth with a further stretch to MacDougall and Krzywicki.

Dagne began to close on McPherson midway through the second lap but the local favourite

extended her lead once more to create what seemed a winning advantage.

And storming through to sixth on the second lap came British fell champion Angela Mudge, clearly at home in the wet but sunny conditions.

By the start of the final lap Mudge was past Ingman for fifth, the leading quintet was spread out and changes in the order seemed unlikely. But Dagne refused to throw in the towel and closed rapidly on McPherson, just running out of time as the Scot triumphed by two seconds.

She said: "On the hill on the second lap I seemed to open a gap without really trying so I started pushing from there. I was going to leave it until later but having got the gap I thought I might as well keep it going."

"Having got a gap on the hill, I pushed hard up there again on the final lap and thought I'd got a big enough lead. I had no idea she was chasing me down but then everyone started screaming at me so I thought she must be coming back."

"I've never had support like it, it was fantastic. It's so hard to get top runners to come to Scotland and it's so fantastic to have one of the Reebok races here. It's a great course and the weather was good today ... I remember one year here I slipped down the hill."

"Now I'm looking to run Durham – I've run there eight times and never had a good race ... hopefully it'll be different this time."

"I'll be looking to race every two to three weeks and hopefully make the World Cross Country Championships team."

Heasman, whose European Cross Country Championships hopes were dashed when she was 10th at the Trial due to a cold, gained on Wright on the last lap but the Leeds athlete rallied to pull away again.

The inter-district match could hardly have been closer as McPherson's West District team held off Mudge's East by one point.

The young age groups also produced some keen competition. The under-13 boys' race saw Orion's Tom Snow triumph after sitting on the shoulder of J Horsman for much of the way.

And under-13 girls' winner Claire Wilson made the long trek worthwhile. She won by 27 seconds after travelling all the way from the Shetland Isles.

The under-15 girls' race produced the biggest winning margin of the day – 32 seconds – as Freya Murray led the East District to a resounding team victory.

The under-15 boys' race went to Michael Chisholm while the proceedings were completed with under-17 victories for Nick McCormack and Jane McCrorie.

Results

Men (8km)

1 A Pearson (Bing) 26:47; 2 D Bannister (SB) 26:47; 3 B Quinn (Kilb) 27:05; 4 R Birchall (Bl) 27:19; 5 C Robison (F'lyde) 27:19; 6 D Leggate (East) 27:54; 7 C Wood (Bris) 28:01; 8 I Pierce (Tip) 28:08; 9 D McNeilly (NI) 28:10; 10 A Puckrin (Tip) 28:14; 11 A Coleman (Env) 28:23; 12 G Hull (Leeds) 28:24; 13 G Pyrah (Scot) 28:33; 14 G Thompson (Craw) 28:35; 15 S Cairns (NI) 28:36; 16 G McLamont (NI) 28:37; 17 B Coyne (Scot) 28:40; 18 A Callan (Scot) 28:47; 19 J Kidger (Craw) 28:53; 20 B Richardson (Scot) 29:01; 21 I Murphy (Scot) 29:03; 22 M Carroll (Scot) 29:18; 23 K Vamey (Metro) 29:19; 24 T Boyle (Tip) 29:21; 25 C Smith (A'dean) 29:36; 26 A Liston (Dur) 29:43; 27 S Evans (Fitt) 29:43; 28 M McIicol (Scot) 29:49; 29 G Stewart (Scot) 29:51; 30 M Griffith (Env) 29:53; 31 D Gow (Scot) 29:54; 32 G Barrie (Scot) 29:59; 33 D Simpson (NI) 30:02; 34 A Reid (Scot) 30:25; 35 R Graham (NI) 30:06; 36 M Bell (Scot) 30:17; 37 W Low (Scot) 30:18; 38 A Jenkins (Cambus) 30:17; 39 S Deakin (Pres) 30:19; 40 J Cunningham (Fife) 30:35; 41 J McDonald (Cent, U20) 30:41; 42 D Whitehead (Scot) 30:51; 43 N Gunston (Dund, U20) 30:54; 44 J Pringle (Scot) 31:00; 45 R Calvert (NI) 31:13; 46 P Dymoke (Linc) 31:16; 47 I Neri (NI) 31:30; 48 D Fisher (NI) 31:44; 49 A Anthony (Scot) 31:45; 50 J Hanratty (C'dale) 34:45

TEAM: 1 Scottish West District 73; 2 Northern Ireland 153; 3 Scottish East District 154; 4 Scottish Universities 187

U17 (3.2km)

1 M Chisholm (Scot) 12:30; 2 J Newsom (Scot) 12:34; 3 A Stevens (Scot) 12:36; 4 S Griffin (Scot) 12:36; 5 C Docherty (Scot) 12:37; 6 T McIntrye (Scot) 12:46; 7 R McIntosh (Scot) 12:53; 8 S Forbes (Scot) 12:58; 9 B Goldrick (NI) 13:01; 10 N Doran (NI) 13:01

TEAM: 1 Scottish West District 53; 2 Scottish East District 76; 3 Scottish North District 126

U13 (3.2km)

1 T Snow (Orion) 12:55; 2 J Horman (Bed) 12:58; 3 S Fraser (Scot) 13:22; 4 D Wallace (Scot) 13:23; 5 K Hay (Scot) 13:51; 6 M Kennedy (Scot) 13:53; 7 G Welsh (Scot) 14:00; 8 K McGregor (Gran) 14:15

TEAM: 1 Scottish West District 59; 2 Scottish East District 78; 3 Scottish North District 96

Women (8km)

1 V McCormick (Scot) 23:04; 2 B Dagne (Ex) 23:06; 3 L Wright (Scot) 23:12; 4 D Wallace (Scot) 23:13; 5 K Hay (Scot) 23:51; 6 M Kennedy (Scot) 23:53; 7 G Goldworthy (Scot) 14:10; 10 H Robertson (Leeds) 23:20; 11 A Kershaw (Scot) 23:41; 12 T Krzywicki (Cham) 23:43; 7 J Ingman (Bams) 23:51; 8 L MacDougall (Glas) 23:46; 9 D Heasman (All) 23:50; 10 A Kershaw (Scot) 23:51; 11 T Brindley (Scot) 24:26; 12 S Partridge (Glas) 24:28; 13 T Thomson (Scot) 24:30; 14 P Powell (B'burn) 24:30; 15 N Lee (Hunc) 24:43; 16 C Thomson (Scot) 24:46; 17 D Percival (Med) 24:57; 18 A McPhail (Scot) 24:59; 19 L McMahon (Scot) 25:22; 20 J Thomson (Scot) 25:11; 21 H Sutherland (Scot) 25:22; 22 S Hidley (Scot) 25:34; 23 E Cochrane (Scot) 25:36; 24 A Fletcher (Dulw) 25:38; 25 S Hatch (NI) 25:43

TEAM: 1 Scottish West District 104; 2 Scottish East District 105; 3 Scottish Universities 268

U17 (4km)

1 J McCrone (Scot) 17:34; 2 J Shannon (NI) 17:41; 3 N White (Holm) 17:43; 4 D Smith (Scot) 17:48; 5 O McCullagh (NI) 17:55; 6 L Hassan (NI) 17:56; 7 S Stevenson (Scot) 17:59; 8 M Cameron (Scot) 18:23; 9 K Forbes (Scot) 18:28; 10 C McDonald (NI) 18:30

TEAM: 1 Northern Ireland 46; 2 Scottish East District 70; 3 Scottish West District 73

U15 (3.2km)

1 F Murray (Scot) 14:13; 2 K Miles (Ellon) 14:45; 3 L Gordon (Scot) 14:49; 4 B Curtis (Scot) 14:51; 5 D Keir (Scot) 14:51; 6 S Marshall (Scot) 14:58; 7 M Walker (Scot) 15:01; 8 H Ballantyne (Scot) 15:05; 9 J Queen (Scot) 15:08; 10 H Stevenson (Scot) 15:11

TEAM: 1 Scottish East District 37; 2 Scottish East District 119; 3 Scottish North District 167

U13 (3.2km)

1 C Wilson (Scot) 14:23; 2 J Christy (Scot) 14:50; 3 S Lamont (Scot) 15:06; 4 L Stewart (Scot) 15:11; 5 M Wright (Scot) 15:16; 6 E Child (Scot) 15:17; 7 F Gentles (Scot) 15:19; 8 E Doman (Scot) 15:21; 9 C McCauley (Scot) 15:26; 10 J Jarrett (Scot) 15:34

TEAM: 1 Scottish East District 29; 2 Scottish West District 87

Championship finalist James McIlroy moved up distance to win over a tough course in the scenic Glenariff Forest Park, Alan Keys reports.

McIlroy was always in the leading group which included his Ballymena team-mate Gerry O'Loen, fell champion Brian Ervine and the holder Matt Shields.

But it was McIlroy who got away at the halfway stage to set a new course record and win by 35 seconds from Ervine, with Shields third.

Pauline Thom dominated the women's race to record her third successive victory and also set a new course record. She finished more than four minutes clear of Alison Sison, with Virginia O'Connell third.

Men

1 J McIlroy (B&A) 38:20 rec; 2 B Ervine (BD) 38:55; 3 M Shields (NI, M40) 39:11; 4 R Curran (BR, M45) 40:07; 5 D O'Loen (B&A) 40:11; 6 A Hearst (Alb) 40:21; 7 S Frazer (FV, M40) 40:51; 8 N Cahoon (Alb) 40:45; 9 A Neeson (BR) 41:10; 10 G Weir (NI) 41:19

TEAM: 1 Ballymena & Antrim; 2 Ballymena, North Belfast

Women

1 P Thom (B&A) 44:42; 2 A Sison (B&A) 49:14; 3 V O'Connell (Lis) 50:29; 4 L Wilson (RUC) 56:26