

TONBRIDGE

are on a roll

KENT CLUB TONBRIDGE AC IS ENJOYING HUGE SUCCESS THIS WINTER ON THE COUNTRY, ESPECIALLY IN THE BOYS AGE-GROUP RACES, WRITES **EMILY MOSS**

AFTER lifting all four men's team titles in the young athletes' age groups in the South of England Cross Country Championships, together with under-17 and under-15 victories at the English National, the latest generation of Tonbridge AC runners is fast establishing itself as one of the country's forerunners on the cross country scene.

The National marked the culmination of an outstanding season for the Kent-based club. Success began early on, with team wins at under-13, under-15 and under-17 boys' level in the Southern Road Relays. This was no flash in the pan either, with the same three teams going on to achieve a third place and two victories respectively in the National equivalent. These same positions were repeated at the National Cross Country Relays in November, highlighting not only the strength in depth of youngsters, but also their consistency at the big events.

Endurance coach and cross country team manager Mark Hookway admits that keeping talented young athletes in the sport can provide a challenge, but is aware that Tonbridge is doing a better job than many clubs and believes this is a key factor in their success.

He reveals: "We encourage all athletes, not just the best ones, but also those who are committed to trying to improve. The training is varied, so although the key sessions are hard, we try to make it fun so that the youngsters want to turn up. We recognise the importance of communicating



Robbie Farnham-Rose leads at the Blackheath Relays last summer

with parents, as young athletes rely heavily on their support.

"However, one of the biggest contributors to our success has been that we focus on the team aspect, encouraging each age group to warm up and train together. We always credit any team successes to the whole group of athletes, rather than just leading individuals.

"It is a team effort on the part of the coaches. In 2002 it was just me and Pete Mason, but now we are helped by Graeme Saker, Darrell Smith, Pete Brenchley and Richard Owen plus others and we all communicate to ensure training at the various locations works smoothly."

Hookway could have hit the nail on the head by suggesting the benefits of youngsters mixing and bonding with teammates. Aldershot, Farnham & District has demonstrated this for years, being a dominant force in terms of success but also being a leader in retaining promising youngsters through the age groups. With the motto "Success breeds success", the club practises what it preaches and firmly believes that ensuring youngsters enjoy the hard work in the right group environment is essential.

But Hookway is under no illusion regarding the importance of transferring junior titles into success on the senior stage. He says: "I hope that these youngsters will continue to develop into adulthood and achieve in senior competitions. We know that if we don't deliver at senior level soon, the finger will be pointed at us for having great juniors but not converting that to senior level.

"We are making steps in the right direction, by retaining more when they go off to university, so I am hoping that even next year we will be able to make advances in this area."

The Tonbridge under-17 men's National Cross team winners (left to right): Luca Russo, Charlie Joslin-Allen, Robbie Farnham-Rose, Henry Pearce





"Until we have a competitive senior team at the National, we haven't really achieved what we set out to do"

MARK HOOKWAY, TONBRIDGE AC CROSS COUNTRY TEAM MANAGER

It already looks as though the plans are starting to bear fruit, with five of the six scorers in the senior men's team at the National being in their early 20s and placing 17th; the highest in 64 years for the club.

The club is also keen to develop on the female side and the under-15 girls' team finished second and third at the Southern and National Cross in recent weeks. They have tried to include more female coaches in an attempt to encourage the girls and hope that as they become more successful, the girls will become role models for younger athletes.

Tonbridge has a history of producing good distance runners, with Kelly Holmes being the most prolific example. The Graffin twins – Allen and Andy – were members of the club in the 1990s, with Andy representing Britain over 1500m at the Sydney Olympic Games.

Presently, 1:47 800m man Steve Fennell and 2010 Southern 800m champion Ben Wiffen do their best to inspire the younger athletes, with Fennell having trained with the boys this winter.

The current crop of youngsters are led by under-20 Andy Combs, who has enjoyed a breakthrough winter, representing Britain at the European Cross Country Championships at the end of last year. Robbie Farnham-Rose is another to have enjoyed success, winning the English Schools' 3000m title last summer

and also representing Britain at the European Cross, while the under-15 boys include English Schools' 800m champion Sean Molloy, this year's Southern Cross winner Max Nicholls and last year's National under-13 Cross champion George Duggan.

Grace Nicholls leads the girls' side having won English Schools' titles on the mud and track last year, whilst under-15 Ruth Bourne placed fourth in the recent Southern and National Cross.

The club is relying on these successful young athletes to put

Tonbridge on the map at senior level.

Hookway says: "We are trying to improve as a club each year and the success this winter has meant a lot. However, until we have a competitive senior team at the National, we haven't really achieved what we set out to do. We make sure the youngsters know this, by of course telling them that they are doing well, but reminding them that it is when they are senior athletes that it really counts."

Tonbridge twins: Andy (52) and Allen Graffin are among the club's former successes



Tonbridge success this winter

South Road Relays: U13; U15; U17 men 1st
National Road Relays: U13 3rd; U15; U17 men 1st
National Cross Relays: U13 3rd; U15; U17 men 1st
Kent Championships: U13 girls 3rd; U15 girls 2nd; U17 women 1st; U13; U15; U17; U20 men 1st, Senior Men 2nd
South Cross: U13; U15; U17; U20 men 1st; U15 girls 2nd.
National Cross: U13; U15; U17; men 1st; U15 girls 3rd.