

NEICAAA Cross Country Championships

Mutai Repeats, White Leads Boston College

Two years following the Covid-19 Pandemic that brought a halt to these century-old championships at Boston's historic Franklin Park, the 2021 New England Intercollegiate Cross Championships rebounded in splendid, competitive fashion on a picturesque Fall afternoon.

Spectators swarmed the park throughout the afternoon with the Franklin Park Zoo serving as the backdrop to these decades-long championships which first began here in 1914. Leading the way for the men and women were Ezra Mutai, the junior from American International and Lauren White, the senior from Boston College.

Mutai, the 2019 defending champion, pretty much had this race to himself for the entire 8-kilometers. Leading from the outset he toured the first of the four-loop course opening up a 30-meter lead. He ran solo up front from there and was never challenged throughout the entire race. Mutai, the NCAA Division II Outdoor Champion at 10,000 meters (29:31.2) finished in 23:56, a commanding 27-second margin of victory ahead of his freshman teammate, Elson Callum (24:23). Third place went to Samuel Mills of the University of Maine in 24:46.

Mutai, who hails from Eldoret in the running-rich Elgeyo-Marakwet County in Kenya's Rift Valley, is now the 7th fastest performer in race history since the course was redesigned for the 1995 season.

"I felt much better than I did in 2019," said the affable Mutai, the 2019 NCAA Div. II cross country champion. "In that year [2019] it was just too cold to run fast. For sure I do not like the cold." Mutai becomes the fourth AIC/Kenyan New England XC Champion to earn multiple victories at these championships behind Glarius Rop (2009-2011), Mike Biwott (2012-2014) and Leakey Kipkosgei (2016-2018).

Mutai will look to successfully defend his NCAA DII cross country title next month on the Abby Course in St. Leo, Florida. While Mutai had little trouble conquering the wilderness and multiple trips up Bear Cage Hill, the real battle was for second place, and a spirited battle it was. Callum eventually took over the second spot mid-way through the race and held form to the finish. The freshman, who hails from Leeds, England, clocked the fifth fastest time by a frosh over the championship race course and became the 47th fastest performer all-time over the 8k course.

Meanwhile, third-place finisher, Mills, who hails from Biddeford, Maine, fought his way up front after what he described as a "terrible" start that landed him somewhere around 60th after the first mile. "All I could do was attack the hills," said the Black Bear junior, who improved 16-seconds on his time from the Coast-to-Coast Battle in Beantown on this same course last month. "It's just me. I like running alone when I can get separated from a pack of runners. I just have more space to myself," said Mills, who was 76th in these Championships in 2019.

Dartmouth College edged Division II American International, 60-78 for the New England Collegiate team title. Brown was third with 89, followed by Central Connecticut, 132. Defending champion Providence finished fifth with 136 points. In total 24 teams scored. Although American International finished 1-2, Dartmouth placed four runners in the top 11. Their fifth runner finished 27th. Whereas the fifth finisher for AIC finished 48th. Leading the way for the Big Green was senior Liam Jamieson who finished fourth. Jamieson was the 5th place finisher in the 5000 meters at the 2019 NEICAAA Outdoor Championships. This was the fifth NEICAAA XC title for Dartmouth since the meetings inception in 1912. Dartmouth also won the inaugural XC title that Year. Today's win is also the first under Dartmouth's newly appointed coaches, Porscha Dobson and Justin Wood.

Lauren White, the Boston College senior, led her team to a dominant victory as she captured her first title in the women's race winning in 17:14, 10 seconds ahead of runner-up Fransischah Cherotich of American International (19:24). In a photo-finish, third place went to White's teammate, Anna Oeser, also clocking in 17:24.

White, who finished 62nd last Spring at the NCAA DI XC Championships, battled most of the 5kilometer race with the lead pack, exchanging leads on the hills and again on the downhills. "We went back and forth changing the lead a few times in the lead pack." Said White, who finished 28th in these championships back in 2017. "Coming out of the woods the final time I started to gain ground. I felt a bit more comfortable. I knew my BC teammates would be up front," she said. "I felt pretty confident coming into the race," White noted. Her performance places her tied for 15th on the all-time performers list on the championship race course. That ties her with Rebecca Donahue (UMass Amherst) who ran the same time in 1996 and placed 5th that year.

The BC Eagles dominated the women's field with a resounding 32-99 win over the defending champions, University of New Hampshire Wildcats. Dartmouth finished third with 125 points. Boston College tucked their top-five runners in the top-11 (1-3-7-10-11). This was the fifth individual title for the Lady Eagles (1997, 99, 02, 15, 21) since the women's championships began in 1975. Boston College now has a total of 13 NEICAAA XC Championships dating back to 1982 when they tied with the Wildcats of the University of New Hampshire. Eagles coach, Randy Thomas, has now gathered a total of eight championship titles dating back to 2002. He trails only Providence College's Ray Treacy who has captured 11 team championships.

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