**REPORT**

**To: Birmingham Invitation Cross Country League AGM**

**Midland Ladies Cross Country League AGM**

1. **Purpose:** The purpose of this report is to update the 2017 AGMs of the Birmingham and Midland Ladies Cross Country Leagues on the progress made following identical motions passed at their 2016 AGMs.

1. **Background:** At the 2016 AGMs both Leagues passed the following motion: -

***There should be a study group to look at the way the Midland Women’s Cross Country League & the Birmingham & District Invitation Cross Country League operate. Should we continue to cooperate as we do now or do we split as separate bodies or become combined in some way***.

***It was recommended that this group (comprising 3 persons) should consist of a Team Manager, and athlete & a Race Secretary***.

I was asked to chair this group. This was a wide brief and I intended to start work when the cross country season got underway in Autumn 2016 but personal circumstances and the death of Dave McNamee who was advising me on some aspects of the study caused a substantial delay.

Also, when I asked both leagues for nominations to the group the Ladies league responded immediately but the Birmingham League did not and I was unable to get any nominations from them. Therefore, I could not form the sub group as suggested in the motion. As a result the comments and recommendations in this report are my own work and concentrate on cooperation between the leagues. This meant that I could not do everything I had planned to do but, I hope this report will give the leagues a clear idea of what can be done very easily and enable the AGMs to give me more detailed terms of reference to progress the work further over the coming year.

For those who do not know me I want to give you some information about my background. I am a member of Leamington C&AC.  In addition to competing in cross country races I have been the team manager for my club in the Birmingham League, Midland Ladies League, the Gloucester League and West Midland Young Athletes League. I am a qualified endurance official and have officiated at cross country races at club, county, regional and national level.

As well as organising cross country races for my club I have been race director for Birmingham League races, including all but one of the joint races held at Leamington, Gloucester League races, five Midland Championships and one Midland 7 and the 2005 National Cross Country Championship. In addition, I was course director for six UK Inter-county championships up to 2015.

On the administration side, I was chairman of the West Midland Young Athletes Cross Country League for 7 years when it brought in many new initiatives to the organisation of cross country races. So, I bring experience as a runner, official, race organiser and administrator to this review.

1. **Report:**

* **Current Position:** Before we look forward it is important to understand how we arrived at the current structure for cross country in the Midlands. The Birmingham league was formed in 1925 and is recognised as one of, if not the, strongest leagues in the country. It is run by the constituent clubs.

The Midland Ladies leagues was formed over 40 years ago, and is run under the auspices of the MCAA. At the time it was formed men's and women's athletes were controlled by separate national bodies. These national bodies subsequently merged.

When I came to the region 21 years ago it held meetings on a Sunday and had races for juniors as well. They subsequently moved the meetings to a Saturday running with the Birmingham league and dropped the junior races. This move has been an outstanding success with numbers increasing from around 100 before the switch to over 400 in some races in recent seasons.

To complete the picture for the Midlands we should also include the West Midland Young Athletes Cross Country League which was formed in 1975 and has races for both genders from under 11 to under 17. It races on Sundays and is run by the constituent clubs

This gives athletes in the Midlands access to league competition from the age of 9. These three leagues have evolved completely independently of each other and as a result have been slow to adopt best practice from each other. Some examples are:

* + **Subscriptions:** The Birmingham league led the way with a subscription per club. The others had individual entries; the Ladies league per race and the West Midlands per season. Both leagues subsequently introduced a club subscription.

* + **Entries:** Both the Birmingham & Ladies leagues allowed entries on the day of the race while the West Midlands entries closed the Wednesday prior to the race. West Midlands now also allow entries on the day of the race

* + **Athletes Numbers:** The Birmingham & Ladies leagues issued numbers for each race whereas the West Midlands league had issued reusable numbers which the athlete kept for the season for over 20 years. The Ladies League adopted this in 2015 and the Birmingham have still not fully adopted it.

* + **Results:** Before the computer age results were published as soon as possible after the race and this usually meant during the week after the race. The West Midlands was probably the slowest because of the number of races in each meeting with the results out on the Wednesday or Thursday following the meeting. In 2009 when Ray Morgan developed a computerised results software for the West Midland league he approached both the Birmingham & Ladies leagues and asked if they would like him to include functionality that would allow them to use it without any cost to the leagues. Both turned down the offer. West Midland now publish the results on the league website within 20 minutes of the individual race finishing.

* + **Expenses:** The West Midland league reimburses host clubs all the expenses incurred to put on the fixture. This includes the cost of venue hire, first aid, mobile toilets, tape and marshals & officials’ refreshments. In addition, it pays the host club a fee of £100 for hosting a fixture. The Birmingham league refunds only the venue hire and first aid. The Ladies League uses the Birmingham venues and pays a fee to the league for this.

* + **Officials expenses**: The West Midland league pays its officials a £5 fee for each meeting attended. The Birmingham league does not pay expenses

It is clear from the above that each league has had good practice that the other leagues could have adopted. Most have been adopted eventually but with sharing best practice between the leagues it would have been done far earlier. It makes the case for inter league cooperation very compelling.

The current structure is that the Birmingham league has 53 clubs in 3 divisions with 4 races per season with each division running at a separate venue though up to the 2015/16 season all three divisions ran together for the first fixture.

The Ladies league has 41 clubs in two divisions with 4 fixtures per season but run the two divisions as one race at the same venue. All the clubs in the Ladies league are also members of the Birmingham league.

The West Midland league has 5 fixtures per season. It has 20 clubs and all these are also members of the Birmingham league.

Of the 12 host clubs for the Birmingham league last season 8 of them have teams in the Ladies league

* **Current Issues:** Before we can look at how cooperation can improve the situation we need to understand what the current issues are. From my personal observation and research there are three: -

**1) 'Them and Us' & 'The Women'** I use these wordings because it is what has been said at a number of Birmingham League AGMs I have attended and in private discussions. There is a feeling among some individuals / clubs that the woman's league is an outside agency feeding off the Birmingham league and not contributing adequately to the facilities it is provided.

**2) Venues:** All the leagues have found that the number of venues available and the number of clubs willing to host have reduced over the past decade. There are many reasons for this; schools which used to host without charge now expect a fee, Health & Safety is being used to prevent events taking place even where there is no good reason to do so, to name but two. These are outside the league's control. However, there are some obvious reasons and some speculative, why venues are reducing which the leagues can address.

* **Car Parking:** My own experience is that this is the biggest single reason why some venues are no longer used or cannot host joint races.

* **Costs:** A host club incurs substantial costs to put on a fixture but as mentioned earlier in the Birmingham league only venue hire and first aid costs are repaid. Effectively the clubs who are prepared to host are subsidising the other clubs in the league.

Research has shown that in the past 20 years over 50% of the clubs in the Birmingham league have never hosted a fixture.

**3) Officials:** It is accepted that the numbers of officials is reducing and it is getting difficult to get the availability of sufficient qualified officials for all the cross country league fixtures let alone the county, regional and national championships plus schools races.

1. **Conclusions**: It is clear in an environment where male and female athletes run together from the age of 9 in cross country, from 11 on the track and from 14 on the road, that if you were designing a model for Midlands cross country today you would not have separate male and female leagues. The fact that venues to run the races and officials to control the races are in short supply just reinforces this view.

Turning to the three problems highlighted earlier. The first was the 'them and us' situation. When you look at the fact that all the clubs in the Ladies league are also members of the Birmingham league the 'Them' or ‘The Women’ are in fact female members of the same clubs. As mentioned above eight of the host clubs from last season have a team in the Ladies league. It just needs a change of attitude to say 'what can we do together' to change this and that can be done immediately and I believe would have the support of the vast majority of the clubs if not all of them.

The issue of venues is more problematical but it is clear that venues that have car parking for over 600 athletes are few and far between and the Ladies league will have to accept that unless they run their divisions at different venues this problem will increase and they will lose the goodwill of the clubs that do host their meetings currently. I suggest that when hosting clubs are asked at the Birmingham AGM would they also host the ladies league those who decline should be asked if the decision would be different if the ladies ran their divisions at separate venues. This would mean that in most cases the men’s race would have more runners than the ladies.

I have heard it mentioned that some clubs find it annoying that when sharing with the ladies the car park is full when they get there and when they run, the course is cut up by the large numbers in the ladies’ race. This can be overcome easily by running the men's race first.

Another reason that clubs don't host could be the cost. If a club haven't done it before there is a lot of initial expense for stakes, metal pins plastic fencing etc before the recurring expenses for each race as mentioned earlier. If the leagues could encourage clubs to start to host by offering advice on organisation and assistance with the purchase of equipment we might be able to bring on a new generation of host clubs and venues. The league should look on this not as a cost but as an investment for the future. Again, this change could be brought in immediately but in reality, we would not see the full benefits for a few seasons.

The situation with officials is disappointing as there was an excellent initiative a few years ago when UKA brought in the endurance official category and all three leagues agreed to sponsor places on the courses. I believe this this never got going as intended but the idea was good and should be continued / restarted.

Why do we expect a volunteer to give their time to officiate and be out of pocket for doing it? The cost of travel increases all the time and all the leagues should consider how they treat their officials.

1. **Recommendations:**

1) In view of the pressure on venues and officials the Birmingham and Ladies leagues should continue to hold joint meetings.

2) To make joint meetings more efficient and to open up more venues the Ladies league should run its divisions at separate venues.

3) The Birmingham league should reassess what expenses it pays to host clubs to ensure they are not out of pocket for hosting. With this in mind the contribution by Ladies league should be revisited. I see no reason why the expenses of joint meetings should not be met equally.

4) Both leagues should consider how they can encourage clubs who don't host to do so. There is a wealth of experience in both leagues to support these clubs and if any equipment is purchased during this exercise it can remain the property of the leagues if that was desired.

5) Both leagues should consider whether they should offer officials expenses.

6) Both leagues should consider how they can increase the supply of new of officials. Perhaps appoint a committee member to run a recruitment campaign.

1. **Summary**:

There is a strong tradition of cross country in the Midlands supported by three very strong leagues and it would be wrong for me not to point out that there is much right with the organisation. However, this can be improved by increased co-operation between them and learning from each other.

The recommendations in this report can be acted on immediately and I hope the leagues will take up this challenge.

***Noel Butler***

***9th March 2017***